DUET

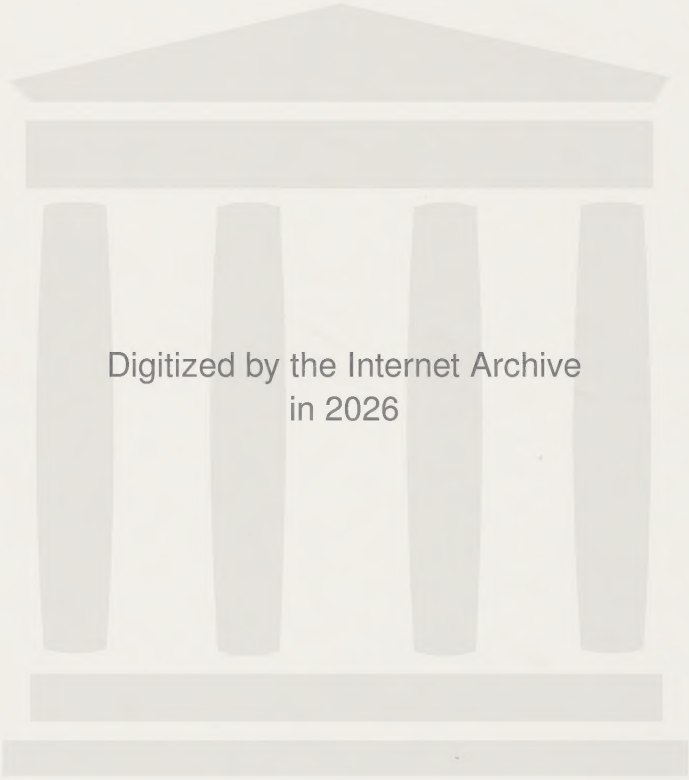
Melanie Jackson

Still Waters

Butterscotch Jones

Make Over

Chloe Boston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by

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Chapter 1

Mountie Chuck Goodhead pulled himself off of the dirt bike that he had parked behind the small cabin in Seven Forks where Anatoli lived.

Since Anatoli's security was state of the art, he had the back door open before the Mountie could unstrap his duffel bag.

"My friend, this is a surprise. What brings you this way?" the Russian asked.

"An ill wind, I'm afraid," the Mountie said.

Anatoli raised an eyebrow.

"An ill wind that I would rather Butterscotch not know about. At least not yet. It's something—someone—from my old life," the Mountie clarified.

This surprised the Russian but he asked nothing.

"Well, come inside and have a drink and tell me how I can help."

That was one of the things that the Mountie liked best about Anatoli. He didn't pry, was always willing to be of service, and seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of fine Russian vodka.

* * *

I try to avoid Doc's smokehouse when it's in use. The odor permeates my hair and makes Max obnoxious with snuffling and licking for days after, since he adores whatever kind of wood the Bones uses for smoking his meats.

In fact, Max adores Doc's smoked meats so much that he occasionally forgets that he is a civilized beast and tries digging his way into the shack. Actually, he doesn't just *try*. Max is resourceful. He isn't the kind of animal who eats everything and horks it up later if it turns out not to be food after all, but when he gets a chance to dine well, he takes it. So, for the sake of neighborly peace, I usually take Max fishing the day after the Bones shoots a deer.

Chuck was away from the Gulch doing something with Anatoli but I wasn't alone with my fishing rod. Besides Max, Chuck's dad was with me. Horace is usually happiest going off

with Sasha and blowing up something, but yesterday had been the anniversary of his wife's passing and he had marked the occasion by dipping into Big John's private still. It was a perilous venture when one was capable of moderation. Horace hadn't been anywhere near as sensible in his levels of consumption. Still, sometimes one needed to anesthetize the inner wounds.

This morning he had wisely decided that there might be sympathetic detonation of his skull if he was around any loud noises and opted for a period of quiet at the lake. Though, with the way Horace kept eyeing the water, I had to wonder if he was weighing the horror of drowning with the pain of wrestling further with the ache in his head.

Usually I look on getting drunk as the height of unhealthy self-indulgence, but this time Horace got a pass. I did my best to be a good daughter-in-law by feeding him black coffee and staying silent while he nursed his throbbing eyeballs and dehydrated brain. I said nothing about the beard that was twelve hours past a four o'clock shadow or that people who drank too much of Big John's homebrew could end up doing the slumber of no return.

Of course, at some level that might have been his intention. At least he hadn't blown himself up with a hand grenade. There would be no good way to explain that to Chuck.

Max was the ideal companion for Horace since he was content to lie by his side and have his fur stroked while he abided in patience. Fishing wasn't fun until something wiggly came on shore. Then it was his turn.

Usually Ricky would have been my companion, since we all try to give the Flowers a rest from her active stepson when we can, and Ricky likes fishing, but I doubted that Horace could have endured the chatter and sound effects that come with a Ricky outing. Besides, Ricky currently thought booger jokes were hilarious and that was also tiring after a very short while. I would have to take my 'nephew' hiking later and let him lecture me about all the lizards and newts that lived in the forest. He had been diligent in his study of the book sent to him by Mountie Thomas Merryweather.

Ricky was actually learning about all kinds of things that weren't in the average school curriculum. Like making fireworks

and explosives, and distilling liquor, and shooting guns. Guns were the latest thing and he was only allowed to practice under Chuck's or Big John's supervision. Normally the Mountie would not have approved of teaching a kindergarten-age child about firing rifles, but we have a bear problem in the Gulch. They had never yet tried to force their way into a cabin with an occupant—and Ricky nearly always had his she-wolf, Sisu, with him and bears generally avoided the wolves. Still, it was a precaution that the Flowers had reluctantly agreed was necessary since Ricky liked to spend his days in the woods and more and more often snuck off alone during the day.

I sighed and cast out my line again. It was actually too late in the day to expect to catch anything but I figured that Horace needed a little more fresh air. As I looked across the glaring pond I saw a flicker of movement in the shrubs at the far side of the lake.

There was a man wearing a camouflage jacket. That usually meant a hunter from out of the area. I didn't reach for my gun or straighten, but I watched carefully until I determined that the man across the lake was not actually a stranger.

No, he was something potentially much worse. It was Agent Desoto of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, armed with binoculars and … a fishing rod?

"Horace," I said, in disbelief.

"Call me Dad."

I never call Horace 'Dad'. I don't think of him that way either since I had loathed my male parent and am actually quite fond of Chuck's father.

"Never mind that. We have company. It's the FBI."

Horace finally raised his head.

"What?"

* * *

Agent Desoto winced as he unbuttoned his jacket. His shoulder was mostly healed, but it still pulled and twinged when he moved the wrong way and the long ride over rough terrain on a dirt bike hadn't helped. Getting shot really sucked. It sucked twice as much now that he was older.

Desoto wasn't entirely sure what he was doing in McIntyre's Gulch. Yes, he had been ordered to take some time off and it was a fact that he liked fishing and the great outdoors. But had he needed to go all the way to Manitoba to look for his fresh-caught meal? And if to Canada, did he need to return to the Gulch where he had, on occasion, been received with less than warmth? What was he expecting to find? Some other secret that would lead to further promotion and other opportunities to be shot? Or was it just that this was about as lost as a man could be? If one couldn't hide from life here, then where could one go?

Screened by a shrub of some sort—Desoto supposed that he really should learn something about the local flora, especially if it was poisonous enough to cause a rash—the agent lifted his binoculars to his eyes and studied the two people and the dog across the lake.

Butterscotch and Max he recognized. Her hair was a beacon of autumn color against the dark of the green flora. The man with Miss Jones was a stranger. He was older and hung over and taking a no-nonsense approach to his coffee as he stared at his shoes. Combined with his hairy cheeks, pale complexion, and occasional hair pulling, Desoto deduced that it was an especially bad hangover. He knew from experience that most of life's minor ills could be mitigated, if not eventually cured, with coffee. Still, this looked like a situation that would require a second thermos and lots of silence.

And, sure enough, the perspicacious Miss Jones reached into her pack and pulled out another silver cylinder which she handed over to the man before casting out her fishing line.

Desoto was debating about showing himself. He had rented a motorcycle in Seven Forks and had enjoyed his unescorted tour of the woods around the Gulch. But his shoulder was stiffening up and it was getting on toward lunchtime. There would probably be something tasty at the Lonesome Moose, provided they agreed to give him a bed, which they would probably do if Butterscotch asked them. Still, this looked like maybe it was a situation that would be better resolved without an audience. Waiting a while to show himself might be wiser.

The decision was made for him when Max rose to his feet and ululated. Butterscotch raised a hand and waved easily.

Busted, Desoto waved back and went for his motorcycle.

* * *

Agent Desoto was looking a little thin and drawn, and from the way he held his body I knew that he was injured. Still, he seemed cheerful enough and greeted Horace with a friendliness that suggested he truly was on vacation.

Horace was not yet feeling loquacious, but he was curious enough about the FBI agent to lift his brain out of the moroseness that had been threatening him. As agreed, we parted ways at the Moose. Horace was off to warn the others—especially Sasha—that the FBI was visiting and to put away anything blatantly illegal.

Neither the Flowers nor Big John reacted too much to the agent's arrival, which suggested that Ricky had spotted us and given advanced warning. I did get a questioning stare from our mayor but all I could do was shrug. The agent hadn't said anything beyond the most commonplace conversation. The reason for his visit was a mystery.

Deciding that it might be best to put a tag on Desoto until we found out what he wanted, I stuck our most indefatigable man on the job. Ricky had had a big breakfast and was only too happy to meet a real FBI agent and find out what he knew about newts and salamanders in the United States. We didn't have to caution Ricky about not talking about his life before the Gulch and we introduced him as the Flowers' son—which he is. Just not in the strictest legal sense. Or any legal sense. We are a self-selected family, united in ways that go beyond biology. It helps that Ricky has red hair just like the Flowers. Just like all of us.

The Flowers fed the agent a venison burger and Big John poured him some ale and then went back to cleaning the already sterile bar and eavesdropping as I gently pumped the representative of American justice for information. Desoto didn't start blabbing state secrets but we could see him visibly relax as he had his meal. His eyes were not inactive, taking in Ricky and Sisu who were sitting with Max and playing cars, and Whisky Jack who was

snoring in a dark corner of the pub, but the tension that suggested he was bracing for a sudden assault gradually died away.

The only flaw in his holiday demeanor was the movement of his left arm, which traveled by spasms, tiny jerks which suggested muscular trauma. We see a certain amount of it around the Gulch because accidents happen even with people who are used to carrying firearms.

The wounded appendage was encased in a flannel shirt of nearly Biblical antiquity. With the old jeans and worn boots, for the first time, he looked like he belonged in McIntyre's Gulch. Had his hair been longer and red, I wouldn't have looked at him twice.

"Of course, it's lovely to have you again," I finaliy said. "And I promise not to interrupt your vacation with lots of questions about how you got shot, but is there anything we need to know about your visit? Is any particular trouble coming our way?"

"Not that I'm aware of. I just … wanted to fall off the grid for a while."

I felt a pang of sympathy at this reply. Of course, he could be lying about why he was there. It was probably best to assume he was. Still, there is nothing like getting shot to make a man stop and think about his priorities. Thinking is easy here. There are very few distractions.

"Well, you can't get much more *off* than here," I said agreeably. "And the fishing is fine if you get out early."

"And we have newts. Rare, endangered newts," Ricky added, looking up and proving that he was paying at least partial attention to our conversation. "I'll show you when you're done eating. Newts mean you can't have a pipeline."

Desoto did his best to look pleased and interested at the prospect.

"Is Agent Goodhead about?" Desoto asked casually as he finished his lunch.

"The Mountie is upholding justice in the far corners of the land," Ricky answered, coming to the table to further pursue his lecture about local wildlife. "I'm looking after Butterstotch while he's gone."

I smiled at the mispronunciation and refrained from ruffling his red hair. Ricky is old enough to resent being called cute.

"Chuck's away for a day or two. He does survival training for Mounties who request outback assignment." I added.

This was true. It just wasn't what Chuck was doing at present. There wasn't any real reason that I should lie to Desoto about the Mountie's plans. It was just habit. Besides, I didn't really know what the plans were.

"He trained Thomas Merryweather, who is also a brilliant Mountie and a biologist, though he isn't very good at building cabins yet."

Ricky still had a case of hero worship for my husband and Agent Thomas Merryweather, finder of endangered newts. Desoto was probably going to be hearing a lot about them from his new faithful shadow.

People began to drift in as Horace spread the word of a visitor. Wendell and Madge were first. Then the Braids. Seeing that Big John and I were okay with the agent's presence they condescended to stop by the table and say a few words in English, though the Gulchers spoke Gaelic among themselves while they sipped their coffee and ate their lunch.

Big John explained that the agent was recovering from a gunshot wound and was there for the fishing. This was accepted and no one was inclined to question this since we were at that moment blessedly free from dangerous governmental secrets, foreign spies, or conspiracies, though Wendell said that he thought raccoons had gotten into his shed where he kept emergency dog kibble. Wendell prefers to feed his wolves on meat but it isn't always possible to get out and hunt for them, especially in winter.

"Is Gaelic hard to learn?" Desoto asked me after I translated this bit of non-news.

"That depends. Do you speak any other foreign languages?"

Desoto's eyes gleamed.

"That makes it easier?" he asked. But he already knew the answer.

"Of course. I heard someone say once that it was like laying down railroad tracks. Once you did the hard work of teaching the brain to open pathways to a new way of thinking, rolling different trains down it is just a matter of practice. So, just out of curiosity, how many languages do you already speak?"

"Besides English? Two."

"Spanish and Russian." I guessed, hoping that wasn't the case. Sasha and the boys often spoke Russian.

"No. Mandarin and Farsi," he admitted. "My accent is bad though and I'm out of practice."

"Gaelic would be fairly easy then," I said, not entirely happily. "Though perhaps not terribly useful, at least not on the job."

He grunted agreement.

"And you, Miss Jones? How many languages do you speak?"

"Just English and Gaelic and some survival French. It's obligatory when you live in Canada." After I said this I realized that it might not have been the best way to put things, but Desoto didn't say anything. Nevertheless I made a mental note to mind my tongue and avoid potential conversational quicksand.

"Well, since there is no chance of escaping it, I guess I may as well go see some newts."

"They're very nice newts. Agent Desoto, are you armed?" I asked.

He hesitated.

"Yes. I have a side arm in my bag."

"That's probably enough but—" I turned to the bar and raised my voice. "Big John, can Desoto borrow your shotgun? He and Ricky are going to look for newts."

"Are they?" Big John looked amused. "Well, that'll be fun, eh? Sure, take the gun. I'll be in all day and not needing it."

"I can carry the shotgun," Ricky said.

"You'll have your camera and guidebook, won't you?" I asked tactfully, since Desoto's eyes had widened in alarm at the suggestion, and he was right-handed. His injury would not interfere with his handling of the weapon should any danger arise.

"Is that really…." he began.

"Yes," I said flatly, before he could injure Ricky's feelings by implying he wasn't big enough to handle a shotgun. Ricky wasn't, but there was no need to say so. "There are bears in the forest. Take the dogs. Take the shotgun. Chances are you won't see a thing, but those are the rules for everyone." I glanced at Ricky so he caught my meaning. "No one goes unarmed into the forest."

"Okay. Dogs and guns it is." The agent thought I was an alarmist but I didn't care.

"Do you need more food and drink to sustain you?" I asked.

"I sincerely hope not." Desoto said dryly, getting to his feet. "I refuse to devote more than a couple hours to newts and the burger should get me that far."

Chapter 2

The woods were dark, scary. Something out of the Brothers Grimm. The trees nearest town, never attacked by professional loggers, had grown arthritic and knock-kneed with age. Not sinister exactly, but not friendly, and Desoto was aware of the shotgun he was carrying. He found himself scanning the warped trees and undergrowth, though not for newts and salamanders.

He was careful not to pump the child for information, since he had the feeling that Ricky would be quizzed about the subjects they covered on their hike, and the Gulch's citizens were none of his business. But then practically everything he stuck his nose into wasn't really his business. And he couldn't shut off intuition. Desoto got the strong sense that Ricky had been born and raised in an urban environment until very recently. Many children might pine at the lack of television and video games, but it seemed that Ricky was having a grand time learning how to live at the back end of the north wind. He was making a second start with the newts and salamanders.

And maybe this was partly why he was there too. The Gulch was a place that he didn't understand, a place that avoided all the usual pleasant dysfunctions and perversions of urban life, but that seemed to be to the good since he was fed up with everything in his life and needing a break.

Though, it was possible that he had been misreading the people and their intentions toward him and one another from the start. It was easy to misread signs since he was sure that everything people did was for some compelling reason that he was unaware of. There was some subcontext that drove the town which he didn't understand. He had been aware of it from the first and was still guessing about the root cause. Still, the town seemed to suit his current mood.

It was intriguing to think that though he might eventually figure out what was going on, he might never understand the why of it. Sometimes, a little mystery was a good thing. Especially since it wasn't any of his business anyway and therefore didn't matter. Not professionally.

"Fishing with rods is okay." Ricky said, making one of his rapid topic switches and interrupting his musing. "But you should let Butterstotch teach you how to fish with your hands. She is better at it than anyone, even Big John. And sometimes you don't have a rod with you when you want a fish."

Big John, not Grandpa.

"I didn't know that. She seems to be very good at lots of things." Desoto glanced at the wolves. Maybe they were part dog. But they couldn't be much domestic canine. Their wild roots were very evident out there in the woods.

"Yes. She saved me from a bear once. Well, mostly it was Max and Sisu. But Butterstotch was right there because she knew something was wrong. It was insinc—instinc—"

"Instinctual?" Desoto guessed.

"Yes. She and the Flowers and Big John and Sasha and the Mountie and—well, everyone—they love me a lot and look after me." He sighed. "It isn't easy to get time by myself."

"You're lucky," Desoto said and meant it, though he was intrigued by this rather adult sentiment about wishing to have some time alone.

Ricky nodded matter-of-factly.

"I can mostly speak Gaelic now. At least, mostly I get it when they talk to me. Talking it back is still a little hard."

"That must have been difficult to learn."

"No, everyone talks it so you can practice. And when I am just a little bit older, the Wings will teach me to fly his plane. Then I can go anywhere."

Desoto blinked but didn't argue the assertion.

"That will be fun." Sometimes it was okay to lie to children. Having the Wings as a teacher would be a nightmare.

"Yes. And I bet that I will hardly ever get sick once I'm the pilot."

Having flown with the Wings, Desoto could only agree that anyone else would provide a smoother ride.

"Probably."

"Agent Desoto?" Ricky stooped and carefully lifted up a piece of fallen bark to examine the underside.

"Yes—call me Des. If you like."

"Okay, if the Flowers says it's alright."

The Flowers, not Mom.

"Sure. What was it you wanted to ask me?"

"I just wanted to tell you not to feel bad because your hair isn't red. Lots of people don't have red hair. Mountie Thomas Merryweather doesn't have red hair."

Desoto didn't crack a smile.

"Thank you. I will try not to worry about it. Does everyone have red hair around here?"

"Mostly. Not Wendell Thunder though. Or Linda Skywater. Or the Bones—but I guess he used to have red hair when he was young."

"So, will we see any raccoons?" Desoto asked. "They seem to have been busy out at Wendell Thunder's place."

Ricky gave him a long upward glance that was hard to fathom.

"Maybe it wasn't raccoons," Ricky said. "Maybe it was a burglar. I think that Agent Goodhead needs to come home and investigate right now. He shouldn't go off and leave us."

Desoto deduced that Ricky had adopted the Mountie as a father figure. He wondered how the Mountie felt about that.

"Well, tell you what, if there are more break-ins maybe I could investigate until Agent Goodhead gets back. After all, I have been on vacation for a while and I might be getting rusty if I don't keep my hand in."

Ricky thought about this awkward suggestion.

"Do you miss investigating?" he asked.

No.

"Yes. Sometimes."

"Did you get hurt while investigating someone?" Ricky asked, proving that he was observant and also a decent eavesdropper.

"No. That was an ambush. A very bad man got put in prison and he sent some other bad men to try and hurt me for revenge." Desoto found he didn't mind talking about it, though he said nothing about the agent who had died in the same attack. Griffen had been fifty-one, had two grown children, a new grandbaby, and a Labrador retriever.

"There are a lot of very bad men out there in the city," Ricky said seriously. "Maybe you should stay here in the Gulch—look! Look at that tree. Do you see the newt?"

Desoto stared where the boy pointed, though he was thinking more about what Ricky had said than about reptiles or amphibians around them. The child was awfully young to know about bad men in the city. Unfortunately, there were a lot of children that found out about bad men way before they should. Had Ricky been one of them, pulled out of the wreckage of another life by his mother when she saw which way their existence was crumbling? Could it be that as much as bears that made everyone in town cautious with the boy? If he was being followed by the kind of bad man that required a child to carry a shotgun for defense, it had to be someone very awful indeed. He could enquire—but no. It wasn't his business.

Still, maybe it was a good thing that he had decided to come to town while the Mountie was away.

"He kind of looks like a leaf right there on the trunk," Ricky prodded when Desoto didn't answer. By then even the wolves had seen the newt.

"Oh—I see him now. I guess it's a him?" Desoto added doubtfully. "How can you tell?"

"I'm not actually sure. Agent Merryweather says that you can tell the difference by size and color, but I haven't figured it out yet. They all look like *hims* to me."

Ricky opened his reference book and handed it to Desoto.

"You can read about it here. If you want, you can borrow it overnight."

"Thank you, but I have some other reading to do," Desoto said, touched but also determined not to get dragged any deeper into the world of Canadian amphibians and reptiles.

* * *

Anatoli refilled Chuck's glass.

"It sounds like you are describing a natural disaster and not a woman," he said to the Mountie.

"She isn't a woman. She's a tsunami."

"Does the tsunami have a name?" Anatoli asked, filling his own glass. He sounded amused.

"Moira." Chuck couldn't have sounded more gloomy. "Moira O'Grady."

"And you have to help her?"

"Yes. I … I sort of owe her." Anatoli raised a brow. "We—we were almost married back in college. I came to my senses in time, but only barely." The Mountie took a deep breath. "I left her at the church. I took my diploma and ran for the Mounties."

Anatoli nodded.

"And so."

"And so it sounds like she is in trouble and I need to help."

"Perhaps. But why do you need me? I have to admit that I do not care to get on the wrong side of Butterscotch."

"Me either." The Mountie might have been speaking at a funeral. "But I do need you. Because Moira is…."

"Yes?"

"She's a mantrap. And this could get really awkward. But it won't be so bad if you are there. And it will sound better when I tell Butterscotch what has been happening." The Mountie shook his head. "At least I had the good sense not to carve her name in my flesh when she wanted to get matching tattoos."

"So you plan to tell her then?"

"Yes. She'll know anyway. She's kind of psychic, eh?"

"I've noticed that. Good instincts. Of course, most women have good instincts for certain things."

"Too good," the Mountie agreed. "I'll be lucky if I don't come home and find her drenched in suspicion. I'll need help declawing the beast. Both beasts. Not that Butterscotch is … well, you know. But she has a temper."

"And what has this Moira done that she needs your assistance?"

"I'm not sure. But last I heard she was active in helping women from the third world migrate illegally into the United States and Canada. She smuggles refugees over the border."

Anatoli blinked.

"She is *coyote*?" His pronunciation was off, but the Mountie understood what he meant in using the American expression for human smugglers.

"No! I mean, yes. But she doesn't take money from the refugees. She gets expenses paid by some underground charitable organization."

"And she has been arrested?" Anatoli asked. "She wished you to intervene with the authorities?"

"No. But I gather that this time she has some people with her who are … special. Maybe dangerous."

"And she wishes you to take over the operation?" He sounded incredulous and the Mountie didn't blame him.

"No. She wants a bodyguard. I'm just not clear if I am supposed to protect the refugee from outside sources, or if I am protecting Moira from her passenger."

"I can foresee an exciting time ahead."

Chapter 3

That afternoon a puzzled and annoyed Fiddling Thomas reported that someone had been in his house and had taken one of his photographs, a picture of his late uncle he kept on the mantle. That brought the unannounced visitations in the community up to four. It was decided by Big John that we needed to call a town meeting for right after breakfast the following morning. People began passing the word.

Agent Desoto dined with Horace and me that night. I made goulash that was heavy on the vegetables as the garden had finally begun producing. Horace and Desoto, who had tried some of Big John's homebrew that afternoon, speculated comfortably on what had gone into the still to make such a potent brew. They agreed on potato peelings and chokeberries and maybe a touch of honey made by vicious killer bees, but the rest remained a lethal mystery shrouded in poisonous enigma.

I couldn't help but notice that the agent was friendly but self-effacing and slightly reserved with Horace. I couldn't tell if this was because his job had discouraged socializing, or if he simply didn't know how to socialize with us. Or perhaps he had other matters on his mind. To his credit, he didn't ask me anything about Ricky, though I knew he had to have questions after the time they had spent together. He was also doing well with our slightly nonstandard diet. The agent had to have had some concerns about parasites in wild meat and the chance of a side of food poisoning which could come with a lack of refrigeration, but I guess he decided that we all looked healthy enough and it would be more pleasant to be treated for parasites down the road than to starve.

* * *

"Hello, Moira," Chuck said to the crack in the doorway filled with a green eye that studied him avidly before switching to a perusal of Anatoli.

"Hi, Chaz. Who's your friend?"

"Just call him Andy. He's here to help."

"Didn't think you could handle me on your own?" she asked, opening the door wide and gesturing them in.

"You sounded like you might need some extra assistance." the Mountie said diplomatically.

The motel room was fairly clean and off the highway but that was about all that recommended it.

Through the connecting door which was hollow-core and badly warped, the Mountie could hear a television. The program came with a canned laugh track.

"So, you maybe want to tell us what's going on?" he suggested.

"Have a seat." Moira cast a quick glance at the connecting door and Chuck opted to take the desk chair which allowed him to face the warped wood. Anatoli perched on the corner of the bed. His eyes moved between the window and the door. "Want some coffee?"

The coffee maker on the dresser was about as old as the draperies and about as clean.

"No thanks. Let's just get on with it." Chuck said.

* * *

Since the meeting would be carried out in Gaelic, no one objected to Agent Desoto's presence at our arcane ritual of governance. He arrived with Big John and Ricky, looking like he belonged in the crowd. The Braids poured him out a cup of coffee and offered him a cookie which he accepted and then he drew up a folding chair beside me. He was wearing a sweater so old that only a moth could love it. Perhaps he had stopped at a thrift shop and equipped himself for the trip.

"No Max?" he asked, sipping from the steaming cup. The Braids does strong coffee, but from what I have heard, nothing is stronger than the alleged coffee brewed by law enforcement everywhere.

"Max is out looking for some leftover bits of winter," I said. "It gets too hot for him in here during summer."

Desoto nodded.

"What is the meeting about?" he asked. "I mean, what do they hope to accomplish?" He looked uneasily at the Gulchers who were all carrying rifles. "They aren't forming a posse, are they?"

"There have been some break-ins at people's cabins," I explained, trying to prepare him for direct involvement in our process of civic betterment. "We are going to see if we can determine a cause and some form of prevention. We need to agree on a remedy before someone gets hurt." I wasn't talking about my neighbors. The uninvited intruder hadn't shown any inclination to violence or to expensive thievery. But we valued our privacy in ways that few outsiders could understand and violating it could lead to a fatal accident.

"Thefts? Vandalism?" Desoto asked with professional curiosity.

"Neither. Not to any extent."

"Are the cabins kept locked when people are away?"

"Not usually. In fact, never in the winter when getting out of the cold can be a matter of life and death. Besides, we aren't the kind of people who lock ourselves away from one another." We just locked ourselves away from the world. "Life can be quite lonely enough without repulsing friends with bolts and keys."

Desoto nodded like he understood.

"So no dark secrets here?"

"Not from one another." The rest of the population was another matter.

"Could it be raccoons?" he asked, but before I could answer Ricky joined us.

"Agent Goodhead needs to come home and investigate. And if he doesn't then we should let Agent Desoto detect things for him." He looked a bit mulish.

"Agent Desoto is on vacation," I said, hoping this was true. I didn't suspect him of the break-ins because they had begun before his arrival.

Of course, he may have been doing all kinds of things before he showed himself in town. I figured that I might have to get in touch with Seven Forks and find out when he had rented his motorcycle. Anatoli was off with Chuck but Misha would be around.

"I don't mind helping out," he said agreeably. "if there is anything I can do."

Right. People would want him nosing around like they would bubonic plague.

"I'll keep it in mind." Good manners cost nothing.

Since neither Father White or Reverend McNab was present, we dispensed with an opening prayer and got down to business, which included exchanging gossip and drinking spiked coffee as we warmed up our voices for the main event. After Big John had shouted some and once again broken the handle off the recently mended gavel, the actual meeting got underway.

"*Slan leat*," Big John said and waited for the ritual reply. "We will now hear from Harry McIntyre, who had the first intrusion."

The people who had experienced break-ins got up one at a time and described what had happened. It soon became apparent that the intrusions were odd. Too clever for an animal and yet not the work of some starving hiker who was looking for food or shelter. The intruder seemed to like pictures which he took or rearranged.

A few people glanced at Whisky Jack but no one seriously suspected him. After all, the only thing he ever wanted was booze and Big John was keeping him supplied as payment for his work on thwarting the pipeline that the government had tried to put through a few months ago.

"We should lay a trap!" Billy Jones shouted excitedly. "I have an old bear trap! That would show them!"

Have you seen those cartoons where a light bulb appears over someone's head? With Sasha and Horace it is more of a cherry bomb, and I could see the fuse light up the moment someone suggested laying a trap. The room erupted with horrible and dangerous suggestions.

"No!" I shouted at Horace and pointed a finger. "You and Sasha will not put out landmines!"

Horace looked abashed.

"Oy! Oy!" Samuel Levine finally shouted. Samuel's voice is so shrill it makes cats wince. "And what if it isn't just some drifter who's breaking in, eh? What if it's *them*? Do you really want to be bringing their wrath down on us by killing one?"

There was some uneasy but welcome silence as people considered his words.

"Are you saying it's the *Sasquatch*?" the Wings demanded. He had flown into town that morning with supplies for the store and was strung out on caffeine. "But why? We haven't been anywhere near them."

The inflammatory word was not said in Gaelic since we don't have a term for *them*.

"Sasquatch?" Desoto repeated when babbling began anew. "Like Bigfoot?" he asked incredulously.

I tried to smile.

"It probably isn't," I told him. "I hope it isn't."

"But—" Desoto objected and I flapped a hand at him.

"Has anyone been out to the place of Big Bones?" Wendell asked, raising his voice above the tumult. Wendell and his late uncle were the only ones who routinely went out that way and they gave the graveyard a wide berth.

Again silence. No one admitted going to the old cemetery and really, I didn't think anyone had. The last unwanted visitors had ended up dead. We blamed the bears for it, but knew better.

"Then I don't see why they would be coming near the town," Wendell said. "They don't like or need us, and they have plenty to eat this time of year."

There was a lot of nodding, but the seeds of the idea had been planted and I could see that people were worried. Was it possible for the men of Big Bones to get curious about us? What would that mean?

"Could it be a ghost then?" Little Davey asked and got cuffed by the Braids.

"There's no ghost," she scolded and the others agreed. We had never had a poltergeist in the Gulch and refused to have one now. The intruder was one of the living.

"Alright, so we are going to be more vigilant and keep a lookout for strangers," Big John said. Then, as the Braids made a face at him, he added, "By the way, the new solar battery chargers are in at the store. Stop by and pick up your orders. They need the space. Does anyone have anything else to say?"

They did, of course. But in the end people agreed to take nonlethal precautions to keep out intruders and to report any new break-ins immediately. Wendell said that he would bring his wolves at once and they would track any intruders.

Big John finally got things wrapped up and without banging his head on the podium, which was about all he had left since the gavel was again broken.

I turned to Ricky and Desoto as the meeting broke up and issued a stern warning.

"Neither of you is to do any detecting outside of town. And you are absolutely forbidden to go anywhere near the place of Big Bones. That includes you and Sasha," I said to Horace.

"I-I wouldn't," Horace defended himself.

"Hmph. See that you don't."

Ricky was looking oddly chastened and I reached out for him. I said in Gaelic, "You must keep Desoto away from there. The last men who went to the graveyard died there."

He squeezed my hand and nodded solemnly.

"I will."

I turned to Desoto, deciding what to tell him.

"There is an ancient burial ground out in the woods. The tribe that uses it is secretive. They suffer from gigantism and are very hirsute and some people think they are monsters." Because they were Sasquatches and not humans, but no way was I going to admit this to the skeptical FBI agent. "They have been persecuted and had their lands violated and their graves dug up by anthropologists, and they have become rather violent about people messing around in their graveyards. We leave them alone and they don't bother us. Please don't stir up any new trouble with trespassing on their land. We don't need any more deaths or a feud with our neighbors."

Desoto was shaking his head, but I think it was in protest of unpunished blood feuds and not because he didn't believe me about people in the woods.

"So," I said, trying for a more cheerful tone. "Who would like to go fishing?"

"Me!" Ricky said at once. "Can we teach Agent Desoto how to catch fish with his bare hands?"

"That rather depends on Agent Desoto," I said, smiling a little. "Not everyone likes standing around in cold water, stalking slithery things."

"I can't think of anything I'd enjoy more," he said blandly.

I was pretty sure that he wasn't done asking questions about the Sasquatch and I didn't really want to stand around in cold water either. But we needed something for dinner and it seemed best to keep Desoto safely occupied while Big John got ready to load up his shipment of homebrew which was headed for Seven Forks and establishments that didn't go in for newfangled things like permits. Horace, too, needed some occupation until the allure of the cemetery went away.

"Okay then. Let's gather up Max and Sisu and I'll get the guns. Ricky, you get the creel," I said cheerfully. "Horace, could you help carry the thermoses. We'll have fish fry for dinner or my name isn't Butterscotch Jones."

I was probably the only one who got the irony of that last remark.

Chapter 4

No public utilities, Desoto thought as he changed out of his wet clothes and got ready for dinner. He had gotten sopped with the coldest water on the planet but by God he had finally managed to catch a fish with his hands while Butterscotch, Ricky, and Horace cheered him on! And he would eat that fish too since he was starving. His missing appetite had returned with a vengeance. It was odd, but though he had been eating like a lumberjack the last couple of days, he had been too busy to get fat.

But at least the inner man and the outer one were feeling more alike. The exterior man had been kind of gray and gaunt and jumpy, and the inner one sluggish and rule bound, chewing on the same thoughts like a cow with its cud. Ruminating, it was called. And no matter how he chewed on it, the answers came up the same. He wouldn't be promoted much higher within the Bureau. He wasn't one of the anointed or a subtle enough practitioner of the high-level political arts.

Unfortunately, he couldn't work the streets anymore either. He was a mid-level bureaucrat and likely to stay there unless Fate intervened in a big way. Damn it! Wasn't a man entitled to be merry in his labors? Was not the laborer worth of his hire? Especially if the labor was onerous? But that wasn't how government worked. It thrived on the lifeblood of optimistic young men—and spit them out with a small pension when it had used them up.

There came a sound of distant hiccupping. That was the generator which powered the kitchen appliances. It was fine living like this in the summer, but how did they manage in the winter? The Lonesome Moose had a large generator which meant bringing in a large amount of fuel—unless Big John ran it on the biofuel that came out of his still? It was possible.

Desoto shook his head at the insanity of it all, but he was smiling as he plucked at his wet laces. One had to expect to rough it when one took spontaneous vacations. It was just the fate that careless planners fell heir to. The accommodations were certainly not four star. No one came and made up the bed or put mints on the

pillow. In fact, as near as he could tell, no one had been near his room since he moved in.

Maybe his hosts weren't as curious about him as he was about them. The Gulch was a backward place. There was no denying it. It could swallow a man whole if he ever went native. Maybe that was what had happened to the Mountie. Desoto knew a bit about that. His own job was all encompassing, leaving no room for a life, a wife, or even a long-term romantic relationship. At least here the Gulchers seemed to manage relationships between hunting for food and chopping firewood.

And a child. Though Ricky might only be visiting his mother for the summer. Had Ricky been a miscalculation, a souvenir from a sojourn in the big city? But why hadn't the kid been here on the other occasions when he visited the Gulch? Maybe he stayed at boarding school most of the year? Surely not. He was too young and the Flowers didn't strike him as the kind of mom who believed in boarding schools.

So, he had been with the father, left behind along with bad memories of a marriage gone wrong? And if so, what had changed to bring the child here? Was the ex one of the really bad men that Ricky had warned him about?

Had the father maybe died, possibly murdered, leaving the Flowers no choice but to bring the child here?

Desoto could just ask, but that would upset the tentative balance of goodwill that he was enjoying with the natives. And he found that he was rather enjoying not being looked at like he was a blight on the landscape.

And it wasn't his business, damn it!

But these break-ins.... These could sort of be his business. If people wanted help. And surely they would since they couldn't be serious about there being photo-loving Sasquatches in the woods.

Desoto pulled on dry socks and then decided to change pants as well. He had rolled his trousers up but they had gotten wet and were studded with twigs and leaves. His brain kept on its chosen course as he dressed automatically.

Sasquatch. It was ridiculous. Except, they had seemed awfully serious at their meeting. And it was just barely possible that there was some remote tribe of Native Americans living in the forests,

though how anyone could mistake humans for the creature they called Bigfoot was baffling.

But then, everything about the Gulch was baffling. Sometimes it was best to just lie back and take it all in before pursuing any action.

It occurred to him as he left his room that he should probably check in on his mother, though she was quite happy in her own hermetically sealed life and wouldn't expect a call from him until Sunday. Desoto glanced at his watch. At that time of day she would be playing bridge with Alice and nibbling on Belgian chocolates that she would walk off later on the treadmill in her living room.

He'd call her on the weekend as he usually did.

"Come in," Desoto said when Ricky knocked on his doorframe and peered into the room. "I'm just about ready. Can't wait to try that fish," he added when Ricky grimaced.

"Catching them is better than eating them. Mostly I let them go."

* * *

I built up the fire, unnecessary for heat since the cabin was full of warm bodies and my chimney narrows until it is tight enough to make Santa rethink visiting, thus keeping the heat inside. But I am not a fan of sushi since fish can carry worms and other parasites and I don't care for the texture or taste. Oak is nice for burning because it makes a clean, hot fire, but it resists the ax unless it is a fallen limb. Besides, the oak trees are few and far between. Pine is easier to split and plentiful and they often uproot themselves during storms, which is convenient. The only trouble is sparks but a carefully built fire with properly aged wood can minimize that problem.

I was cooking the fish in butter and had bought a lemon from the Braids in case Desoto wanted some as well. We were having gingerbread pancakes with maple syrup and applesauce for sides. Probably there were more exciting menu choices, but Ricky and Horace could both be a little finicky.

Through the open door I could hear Fiddling Thomas practicing a reel and making a joyful noise unto the Lord. Or at least unto his neighbors. From his choice of music, I knew that he was in a good mood and figured that he must have gotten his truck working.

Ricky and Desoto arrived together and Horace came soon after, bearing a bottle of wine which I left him to open and pour into my mismatched glasses.

The fish came out first and I let them get started with deboning their dinner while I got on with making the flapjacks. I had done Ricky's for him since he is still a bit grossed out by the process of pulling bones from flesh. Horace and Desoto were on their own.

We talked easily of nothing in particular while I cooked, though I knew full well that Agent Desoto's mind was at work. It was always working, collecting and processing everything he saw and heard. He couldn't help it.

"Incoming," I warned.

I tossed Max a ginger pancake and then flipped a last flapjack onto Desoto's plate, forgetting he wasn't Ricky or Horace, and got a surprised laugh out of him.

"Butterscotch?" Horace asked at last, mellowed by food and wine. "About that cemetery."

"Don't go there. You wouldn't like it. It doesn't have monuments or pretty flowers. It's just mud and weeds and wind. For a place that has nothing but dead people it is … unquiet." I stared at him, reminding him that Desoto and Ricky were there.

Horace glanced guiltily at Ricky and the agent and subsided again.

"Speaking of ghosts, those stairs at the Moose make a terrible noise," Desoto said. "I went down them the other night and was afraid that I'd wakened the whole house."

The whole house was Big John and he slept like the dead, but I didn't mention this.

"Well, that's because the wood was taken from a gallows and it's the condemned screaming from beyond the grave," I said with a straight face. At Desoto's stunned expression I began to laugh. "Agent, I am kidding. There has never been a gallows anywhere

near McIntyre's Gulch. The founding fathers came here to escape the gallows which they would have adorned with their fellow Jacobites had they stayed in Scotland."

Some of the founders actually were Jacobites. That wasn't the sole reason that they had fled their country of birth though.

"Butterstotch?" Ricky asked.

"Yes?" I sat down at the table to eat my own pancakes. It was a bit crowded with four of us but no one seemed to mind.

"Shouldn't Agent Desoto have a nickname while he's here?"

This gave me pause. He did have a nickname from before. It wasn't an especially nice one.

"We need to think on that. After all, a name is not to be given lightly. It must be just right since you will have it forever."

Ricky nodded, accepting this answer. I began to eat, ignoring Max's wistful gaze. He has perfected the art of looking starved.

We knew Wendell was coming when Max got up and began his greeting ululations at the open door. We didn't need for the sober-faced Wendell to speak to know that something bad had happened.

"The Bricks has passed," Wendell said without preamble, standing just outside the open door. My cabin is small and we were rather full, but I think he was holding back because he was speaking of death and did not want to bring it into the house. "Big John and I will be standing first watch. Fiddling Thomas and the Wings have gone to dig the grave. Little Davey is banging together the coffin."

James McIntyre had been a stickler for the old customs and would want a wake to guard the passing of his soul. However, given that it was summer and we had no way to embalm him, it would not be the full three days he would have liked. I was just as happy that women were not expected to watch over the dead. He would be wrapped in a winding sheet after washing and somehow that made the death seem even more grim and final.

"They've stopped the clock?" I asked, at a loss for what else to say. There was no need to ask if the windows of the cabin were open. They would be until nightfall so his soul could leave.

"And covered the mirror." Wendell knew our old ways too.

"Will Ginny Six need any help?" Ginny was James' sixth and only living child who had returned to the Gulch twenty-odd years ago. It would be her task to wash the body and prepare it for burial. I did not spell this out with Ricky there.

"She says not. Madge has brought her a winding sheet."

That was good. It wasn't a task I relished. I had done it once before for old Heather McIntyre, who also had kept the old ways.

"Big John has been on to Reverend McNab?"

McNab handled our traditional funerals.

"Yes. The Braids raised him." On the radio. "He'll come by noon on the morrow."

I nodded and Wendell backed away a step or two, preparing to continue as harbinger for the others who lived on the way to the Bricks' cabin. He seemed to be waiting for something so I said, "Then I'd best be talking to the Flowers about the Dedgy." The Dedgy is the last meal prepared for the mourners after a funeral.

His look of relief told me that this had been his concern. Some of the traditional foods could be pretty awful in the hands of a less than stellar cook and since we were all supposed to partake of the funeral meats—some kind of survival of the tradition of the old sin-eaters, I guess—decent food was to be hoped for.

"That would be good."

I turned to my guests after Wendell departed. They were quiet and somber, even Max who is sensitive to human moods.

"This is sad news for us, but the Bricks was an old, old man. He lived a full and happy life and we should not mourn his going on to a better place," I said gently. This might have been a slight lie since he seemed rather grumpy to me and I didn't feel qualified to say what was waiting in the afterlife. I fed my last pancake to Max. "Are we all done? Then we had best get on to the Moose. Leave the dishes on the table. I'll tend to them later."

Everyone rose quietly.

Horace and Ricky rushed ahead once we were outside. Ricky ran because he had energy. I think Horace made haste because he wanted to work on some commemorative fireworks out in Sasha's shed.

"We will be having a funeral tomorrow. It will be … traditional. There is no reason for you to attend, if you would rather not," I said to Desoto.

"Would I be intruding if I went?" he asked.

"No. The service will even be mostly in English since Reverend McNab is officiating."

"Then I think I will come." he said, surprising me a little. Of course, what else was there to do when every other being in town would be at the funeral?

* * *

The interment procession commenced at three p.m. with eight pallbearers carrying the small coffin from the dead man's cabin and Fiddling Thomas playing a lament along the way. A bottle of scotch was passed around and everyone, even Ricky, had a drink.

As Butterscotch had warned him the night before, the women peeled off at the cemetery entrance and left the funeral to the men, since it was what the Bricks would have wanted. The dead man's granddaughter was carrying a loaf of bread which had been left sitting near the body to absorb its sins. Desoto made a mental note not to eat any of it.

The females would hold a prayer vigil at the Moose and then set out the food for a late lunch, including the funeral loaf. Ricky was offered a chance to leave but decided to stay with the men. He held Sasha's hand though.

The waiting hole was only five feet deep and lined with evergreens which Desoto assumed were a symbol of eternal life. He found the gesture somewhat comforting and wondered why everyone didn't do it. Certainly the previous funerals he had attended could have used something to make them feel less canned. Death should not be left to institutions that made everything feel impersonal.

The faces around him were not hard but they did not weep. Perhaps the tears had been wrung from them long ago by early tragedies.

In the last few days Desoto had grown accustomed enough to the Gulch that the people no longer seemed that alien, but standing

in that cemetery and seeing that each grave was marked with a flat, carved stone they called a resurrection-defier, but which were actually intended to keep animals from the bodies, he couldn't help but be struck once again by the fact that the only names in the entire place were Jones or McIntyre. The dates went back three centuries but the names didn't change. These odd birds had been nesting in the same family trees for centuries and the accumulated longevity was amazing. They should have been toothless and walleyed from inbreeding, but they all looked unusually alert and hardy. Survivors.

But they were alike in one way. Around him was a sea of white and red heads. No blonds, no brunettes, and only two with black hair and they were Native Americans, which somehow made them belong there. Even Reverend McNab had red hair. The minister's face was wrong for the Gulch, being round and well fed instead of lean and wary, but that might have been because of his dentures which seemed to have been made for someone with a truly prognathous jaw.

Desoto alone was an outsider.

Yet, no one pushed him away. No one stared pointedly at the stranger among them as they buried their dead. Perhaps death transcended all earthly difference and Donne had it right about every man being a piece of the continent or whatever he had said about humanity being united by mortality.

The reverend was garrulous and sounded in need of something hot to drink, but his antique words were moving and this time Desoto really thought about them and what death meant.

I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, yea, though he were dead, yet shall he live. And whosoever liveth and believeth in me, shall not die forever... I know that my redeemer liveth, and that I shall rise out of the earth in the last day, and shall be covered again with my skin, and shall see God in my flesh: yea, and I myself shall behold him, not with other, but with these same eyes... We brought nothing into this world, neither may we carry anything out of this world. The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away. Even as it hath pleased the Lord, so cometh things to pass: blessed be the name of the Lord... Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live, an is full of

misery. He cometh up and is cut down like a flower: he flieth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay. In the midst of life we be in death: of whom may we seek for succor but of thee. O Lord, which for our sins justly art displeased. Yet, O Lord God most holy, O Lord most mighty, O holy and most merciful savior, deliver us not into the bitter pains of eternal death. Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts, shut not up thy merciful eyes to our prayers: but spare us Lord most holy, O God most mighty, O holy and merciful savior, thou most worthy judge eternal, suffer us not at our last hour for any pains of death to fall from thee.

Well, amen to that, Desoto thought. *And thank God it isn't me lying there. Not yet*. That meant that there was still time to change things. He wasn't sure just yet what those changes would be, but some things were going to be different when he went back home.

Reverend McNab switched to Gaelic. Horace moved closer and in a show of courtesy began to translate in a soft whisper:

Come I this day to the Father, come I this day to the Son, come I to the Holy Spirit powerful. God listen to my prayers, for I know you are hearing me as surely as I if I were seeing you with mine own eyes. Let no thought come to my heart, let no thought come to my ears, let no sight come to my eyes, nor ill to my soul at this hour of death. Amen.

Desoto murmured *amen* with the others and then began to smile. The reaction was involuntary. Fortunately, no one except Horace noticed this rather odd reaction to the funeral rites. Desoto would have been hard pressed to explain it even to himself. It had just occurred to him that he wasn't dead. He wasn't going to meet his maker. Not yet. He still had time to do anything he wanted.

He looked around at the others, wondering if they were likewise uplifted by the realization of their good fortune. Apparently his wasn't the usual reaction. The only other smiler in the crowd was Whisky Jack and that grin wasn't a joy to see since it was badly yellowed and the eyes above it were glazed. Desoto looked away quickly, determined to rid his eyes of the visual encumbrance that might ruin his light-hearted mood.

* * *

The Mountie was wrestling with his conscience and his conscience was winning. What was he doing? Not only was he helping an ex-girlfriend to traffic in illegals. He was stuck in another lousy hotel far away from his wife and hearth. He hadn't even radioed the store to find out what was going on back home.

Not that anything was going on. Nothing ever did. Still….

"Chaz?" Moira appeared in the door. Her face was pinched but she seemed more excited than frightened.

Anatoli looked up from the gun he was cleaning. The Russian seemed hopeful. He was bored and also a little smitten with Moira.

Better him than me, the Mountie thought.

"What's wrong?" Chuck asked.

"Sonya thinks someone is watching us. They are hiding in the trees behind the hotel."

Chapter 5

Some slouching imposter had taken over Desoto's body while he was at the cemetery. The stranger sauntered as if all pain and tension had left his body. The stranger grinned—sometimes widely enough to show his molars. Funerals can affect people in different ways, but this was a new one on me. Maybe he had found religion. Or he had given up trying to figure out the things that perplexed him and which he needn't cope with while on vacation. He seemed at home, at peace, and since no one was eyeing him with fear or suspicion, I went on serving coffee, spiked for those who requested it, and dishing up the hot casseroles and pie and taking round the basket of sliced bread that had been sitting by the Bricks' body. Desoto had raised a brow but after a moment took an end slice. I didn't wait to see if he ate it. I couldn't blame him if he didn't. After all, he had no obligation to take on a stranger's sins and the custom was pretty gruesome.

Horace noticed that his coffee was plain and muttered something about petticoat despotism, but he smiled as he said it and I knew that he didn't really mind. Or at least didn't mind that I cared enough to look after him while the Mountie was gone. Besides, Big John would supply him with hooch if he decided he really wanted it.

The day had seemed too lovely for a funeral and Nature belatedly reached the same conclusion and brought out some heavenly tears to fall on the darkening afternoon. We had not held a more traditional, riotous wake before the Bricks' passing which had left some feeling deprived, so given the weather and that no one had an inclination to be out in it, we chose to hold a belated party at the Dedgy. Instruments were fetched, voices were oiled with more scotch, and the chairs and tables were pushed back when the eating was done so that there could be dancing.

I took a turn on the floor with Big John and then with Wendell, but then pulled up a chair by the empty fireplace and watched the others twirl and stomp. I found myself missing the Mountie and wondering if I would look too needy if I tried to reach him by phone. We have always had a rule that we would not use the telephone (which can be listened to) unless there was some

pressing emergency. I decided to be patient though it made me sigh rather heavily.

"You are missing the Bricks?" Desoto asked. The phrase sounded odd coming from him, though I was pleased that he was making an effort to use the local names and terminologies.

"Mostly I'm missing my husband," I confessed. "We haven't many occasions for dancing here. Not during the summer when there is so much to do to get ready for the change of season. And in winter when we have time it is less fun to caper about in snowsuits and boots."

"I can imagine." Desoto smiled again. His seraphic expression was a little disturbing.

"Agent, are you high on something?" I asked curiously. "They didn't talk you into eating or drinking something peculiar out at the cemetery, did they? No special funeral mushrooms or something?"

"No. I mean, no, no one fed me anything. At least not anything everyone else didn't have too. But I do feel a little high. Like I fell through a looking glass and am seeing everything differently. More clearly."

"Because *you* aren't dead and have been feeling like you should be?" I guessed.

"Yes, almost." His brow furrowed briefly. "I think that I have been feeling guilty about … someone who died. The weight was crushing me. But it wasn't really my fault and I suddenly realized that I should be fu—uh—freaking grateful that I wasn't the one being lowered into the ground with Griffen. I can never make what happened okay, but I can be grateful that I'm not dead too, and take advantage of the extra time I've been given. Not everyone gets a second chance."

I nodded.

"Second chances are rare and precious," I agreed. "Wise people don't waste them."

He looked around the room, his eyes finally settling on Ricky and the Flowers who were gathering up dishes.

"I have the feeling that a lot of people here know about second chances," he said, and I knew he was again speculating about Ricky's presence in the Gulch.

"Yeah. I think almost everyone in this room understands about getting the chance for…." I paused.

"Redemption?" he asked.

"Restoration," I corrected. "A chance to put things back in order after life has kicked you in the teeth."

"Do you think you will ever tell me who knocked out your tooth?" he asked. His voice was idle, a friend inviting me to share a story but not trying to pry. I chose to believe that his question was benign. I didn't avail myself of the opportunity though. He probably thought my father was to blame for my retreat north, and I supposed my venial parent was indirectly responsible. Though the agent was having some kind of emotional epiphany, at the end of the day he still worked for the FBI and they still had terrorist watch lists where my old name lingered, down in the bowels of some database. I would not put his sense of duty to the test. Euphoria always wears off, sooner or later.

"It wasn't one tooth. But, no. I don't think that's a story I'll ever tell to anyone." Not anyone from the outside. "It was a lifetime ago and happened to a kid who isn't around anymore. Let her and the past rest in peace. The present is plenty good enough." Or would be if Chuck was there.

"I think you're sensible." Desoto said, rising. "Reliving the past is pointless. Especially if it's unhappy. You get a second chance, you take it."

* * *

"I have seen no sign of anyone," an exasperated Anatoli said to Chuck. He was caked in mud from the ankle down and wearing a mantle of yellow pollen which had both of them sneezing.

"No, me neither," Chuck agreed, swiping at his cheek which was itching fiercely. "Have you been in touch with anyone back home?"

Anatoli raised a brow.

"In fact, yes. I spoke to Misha a while ago. He called to tell me that Butterscotch had phoned him to ask about Agent Desoto."

"What?" Chuck was so startled that he stopped rubbing his cheek.

"Misha rented him a motorcycle. The agent has apparently been staying in the Gulch while recovering from a gunshot wound."

"But…" Chuck floundered.

"Yes. But apparently no one is alarmed," Anatoli said comfortingly.

"*I* am alarmed."

"It is doubtful that anything will happen today. There has been a funeral."

Chuck goggled some more.

"The old man—the bad-tempered one called the Bricks? He has died. They are having the funeral party today."

"The funeral party," the Mountie repeated. "Anatoli, I have got to get home. I'm going to tell Moira to get loaded up for the final run. There's no one in these woods and I have to get home."

"You may tell Moira to *load up*, but I don't know if she will do it. She seems very … determined to wait here for her contact."

"She will *load up* if she wants my company," the Mountie said grimly.

* * *

The party broke up well before dark, but since days were so long, a light sky didn't mean an early evening. Feeling pleasantly full of food and various types of alcohol, Agent Desoto helped the Flowers carry the last of the crockery into the kitchen and then opted for a short stroll before bed, since his hostess was acting like she wanted everyone to leave so she could get on with the clean-up alone and he needed a moment before mounting the wooden hill that led to his borrowed bedroom.

He also needed a breath of fresh air after the weird Canadian-Celtic saturnalia that had beat the pants off any other funeral he had ever attended. It had been fun but his ears and lungs demanded some quiet and time away from the whisky fumes and pipe smoke. It had been a long while since he was pounded with voices and tobacco fumigants in close quarters. And he had eaten too much. The food was a little strange—venison and what might have been mutton. And there was some kind of salmon mousse thing which

tasted pretty good though his mom's habit of molding leftovers in aspic had made him generally disapprove of gelatinized fish, meat, and poultry. And the cheese. He was a bit lactose intolerant and the wrong cheese could be a real gut-bomb.

Night was falling and the dark up there was profound, black but alive in ways that no city dweller could understand. There was some bird that liked to sing at dusk. He had noticed it the night before right as he closed his window. It probably wasn't a nightingale, but it might be, and whatever it was he found it peaceful to listen to.

No, this wasn't a twenty-first century town. In fact, it wasn't a town that seemed interested in learning anything about the twentieth century either, which meant they were missing out on a few things.

On the other hand, if you really wanted to stay off the grid, this was the only way to do it. Once tech got its claws in you it was the—what had Reverend McNab called it?—it was the *bourn* from which no privacy returneth. One couldn't live a modern life and retain any isolation of information.

Stepping into the street as he pondered the day, Desoto didn't exactly forget Butterscotch's injunction about venturing out unarmed, but since he didn't plan on leaving the general environs of the Lonesome Moose, he decided to forgo the ironmongery.

The rain had stopped but twilight made things seem a bit dreamy and out of focus and the flowering shrubs along the street were in full bloom, creating a pretty but obscuring cloud of yellow blossoms which further impeded his view. Stepping from the golden light being shed from the pub's window, it took Desoto a long moment to decide if he were actually seeing someone escape from a window, or if it was merely a trick of the dying light, reflecting on the glass. A moment of contemplation assured Desoto that he was seeing a small person climbing out an open window of a two-story cabin not far from the pub. Since there were no midgets in town, he wisely concluded that the slight figure was Ricky.

Brows drawing together, he watched as the boy crawled down the steep roof until he met up with some kind of trellis, which he

scrambled down like monkey bars on a playground. Obviously it was not his first escape.

Desoto's frown deepened when the boy carefully pulled a small pistol out of the small of his back and checked it with surprising efficiency. Satisfied, the boy stowed the pistol away and scampered up the street, heading for Butterscotch's cabin and the woods.

Intrigued, Desoto followed. If the boy was only sneaking out to see Butterscotch, he would let it go, but if he were thinking of going into the forest then he would have to intervene even if it meant being a spoilsport. He didn't like the idea. In his experience, no intervention, however kindly meant, was welcome by the party being interfered with. But armed or not, he couldn't let a child go into the forest. Especially not with night falling.

Discretion was called for though, and that could be tough when he was the one and only brunette in town. He wasn't sanguine about his welcome surviving if he were caught doing anything that resembled snooping.

* * *

Max and I were about to get ready for bed when I looked out the window and saw Agent Desoto creeping around in the shrubbery near the Bones' house. The Doc and Linda Skywater had left earlier for the Brokenhead reservation and I knew the house was empty. I couldn't imagine what the agent could be stalking through the twilight, but it seemed best to investigate before he discovered something he shouldn't. Like our burglar. Whoever or whatever it was, the agent didn't need to know about it.

Desoto's attention was so fixed on his quarry that it was easy enough to sneak up on him. To his credit he didn't shout or even jump all that high when I laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Butterscotch," he whispered with relief.

"What are you following?" I asked, in a low voice that wouldn't carry. I shifted the rifle onto my right shoulder.

"Ricky."

I stared.

"He climbed out of the window of a house near the Moose. The kid has a gun. But, damn, I've lost him. Was he coming to see you?"

"No," I said in a normal voice as I straightened and whistled for Max. Desoto also stood straight. He looked a little sheepish.

"Maybe I overreacted," he said. "I didn't want to spoil his fun if he was coming to visit you, but I was afraid he might be going into the woods."

"You were right to follow him," I said with more than a bit of consternation. Could Ricky have been heading for the woods? At night? Surely not. Newt mania hadn't progressed that far.

I told the dancing Max to find Ricky. I was having trouble believing that Ricky was our town intruder, but it would explain why Wendell's pack hadn't found anything at the other cabins. They had been scenting for strangers, not someone in town.

"What is the brat up to?" I asked aloud as Max bounded away. He was headed for the Doc's cabin and I hoped it was Ricky he was after and not whatever might be left in the smokehouse.

Desoto cleared his throat.

"It's none of my business," he began and I resisted the urge to agree with him. "But Ricky was saying that he thought the Mountie should come home and spend some time detecting the local intruder. Do you think that maybe…?"

"This is a plea for attention?"

"Yes."

I thought about this. Ricky had, on the surface, adjusted awfully well to life in the Gulch, but the change had to have been traumatic and Sasha wasn't a great father figure. Big John was also often very busy. And he had bonded with Chuck in a special way. It was probably that he was missing him.

I was missing him too.

Ricky was right; it was time for my husband to come home. Whatever he and Anatoli were up to, it needed to end.

"You may be right. In any event, it is time for the Mountie to come home."

"Is he … can he come home?" Desoto asked.

"Of course. Though, I must point out, that there are questions you just shouldn't ask people here," I said gently.

"Yeah, I get that."

Max ululated and appeared around the side of Doc's cabin with Ricky in tow.

"Butterstotch!" he said in surprise and then noticed Desoto. "Agent?"

"You're busted, kid," I said, though I didn't make him hand over the pistol he was carrying. "Did you really think that you could fool an FBI agent with this stunt?"

Ricky began to grin.

"It isn't funny," I scolded. "You know better than to be out at night. And you will give back anything that you've taken from people's homes. Tomorrow."

"I didn't take anything," he said virtuously. "I just moved it around."

"Uh-huh. That's good—not taking things. But this housebreaking stuff is also over, is that clear? What would the Mountie say about this kind of behavior?" Ricky nodded as if agreeing that his actions were shameful but I could almost see the fingers crossed behind his back. "If I catch you out alone at night again you will learn about another tradition we have in the Gulch."

"What's that?" he asked, beginning to look concerned.

"You don't want to know," I said, unable to come up with anything dire enough that I would actually be willing to follow up with. I don't believe in making idle threats. "Come on now, and we'll walk you home."

"Okay," Ricky agreed reluctantly.

We started for the house. Desoto kept silent and back half a step.

"How did you get Sisu to stay quiet when you left the house?" I asked.

"I've been teaching her. Wendell showed me how. He says I'm a good dog trainer."

"Well … you're doing a good job with her that way. By the way, I am going to call the Mountie tomorrow. I think it's high time he wind up his project and come home."

Ricky looked up and smiled. It was sweet but I feared it wouldn't last long. His stunt wouldn't go unnoticed and the Flowers was apt to give birth to kittens when she figured it out.

As I had feared, the Flowers was waiting on the porch when we returned. She hid her alarm as soon as we appeared in the gloom but I saw the flash of maternal terror before it was buried with relief.

"I've had a visitor," I said, opting not to add to the Flowers' woe by mentioning Ricky's venture into the Bones' house. She would probably figure out what he had been up to on her own.

"Ricky! Why did you sneak out? I was worried when Sisu began to whine and scratch at the door. You know you can't go out alone after dark." She sounded as much exasperated as frightened and the hands on the hips suggested that anger was in ascendance.

So the little wolf's training wasn't perfect yet. That was probably a good thing. We wanted Ricky to be self-sufficient but not cocky, and Sisu's primary job was to protect him.

"See you in the morning," I said, electing not to remain and see whatever parental justice was dispensed. The Flowers wasn't the type to resort to physical violence but I figured Ricky might be in for a spanking.

That was also probably a good thing. We had been lax with him lately because of the longer days and because the bears weren't as likely to be around. None of us really knew much about being parents.

Not too much to my surprise, Desoto turned and walked back toward the cabin with me. Perhaps it was simply a gentlemanly impulse, but I was betting that something else was on his mind. He had been behaving oddly all afternoon.

* * *

Agent Desoto wasn't sure why his footsteps were taking him toward Butterscotch's cabin and away from the Moose, but it seemed the right thing to do. He wasn't going to ask a bunch of questions or anything, but he couldn't help but be curious about this self-contained woman who was obviously educated, but went around catching fish with bare hands and living in a cabin without electricity.

Why did she do it? Why did any of them do it?

"Agent, I will make you some coffee or even some tea, but I am not up for answering questions," she said, as though reading his mind. "Not about Ricky, or me, or anything except fishing."

"I'm just walking off dinner. And the tobacco," he added. "I'm not around smoke much and I feel a bit like I've been roasting in a smokehouse."

"I don't care for the smoke either. I don't have anything to help with the smoky lungs, but some ginger tea will help settle your stomach."

She opened the door to her cabin.

"Thanks," he said, feeling happy to be given a place at her hearth. He didn't want her to think he was a pestiferous ghoul, talking about the death and its implications at their fireside chat. Nor could he ask about the various things he had observed in town. The succubus of his curiosity would have to go unsatisfied. Desoto cast about for something to talk about.

"Everyone around here seems very healthy," he said at last. Surely health was a safe topic. "Not much obesity either."

"You don't overeat when you have to catch your own dinner." She smiled for a moment. "And we don't get sick much because there is no one to infect us. Which is good because the Bones is great with breaks and sprains and extracting bullets but couldn't do much against influenza or smallpox."

"Smallpox?" Desoto was startled, but then he thought about it. "Have any of you been inoculated?"

"About half. Maybe. Those of us who spent time away from the Gulch have usually collected up the normal vaccines. But the rest are as pure as they day they were born."

"God have mercy," he murmured.

Half. Desoto made an effort not to shake his head. He simply hadn't considered the idea that there could be any place in North America that could be laid low with tuberculosis or smallpox.

Butterscotch finished mashing the ginger in the bottom of a mug and then added hot water from the iron kettle steaming on the hearth. She had obviously been getting ready to make tea for herself.

"We rely a lot on Divine providence. Disease is yet another reason that we discourage visitors."

Desoto took the mug she offered and wisely didn't ask about the first reason. The specifics didn't matter. Not anymore. No inoculations? That was plenty reason enough.

* * *

Chuck pulled off the highway and parked in the grass among a couple of dozen other vehicles. None were new or expensive.

"Wait here," he said to Moira and Sonya. He figured Anatoli didn't need instructions.

Chuck walked up the long drive between a row of cedars. The night was thick with silence. There were lights on in the building up ahead, but not many. It looked like any normal country house, calm and quiet and ready for bed. If one had to pick a headquarters for illegal activity, this wasn't a bad one.

There was no reason that his hair should be standing on end, but it was and growing more erect with every step he took. His months living in the wild had obviously heightened his senses. Chuck stopped and drew out his pistol.

The trees were limbed up too high for most people's tastes and he could see a security camera mounted up in a tree. The camera wasn't unexpected but something about the situation made him uneasy. This was how they cleared ground around high-security prisons.

A branch cracked behind him. It was a relief when he spun around and found Moira behind him. It was not a relief when she reached for him with both hands.

"Chaz—"

"No!" he whispered and stepped away. "Go back to the car. We're in danger."

Instead of obeying, she tried to shrink against him and wrap her arms around his neck. Chuck pushed her away. He wasn't brutal but he was angry enough to not bother letting her down easy.

Anatoli appeared with Sonya. He also had his pistol drawn and a woman clinging on his arm.

"Sorry," he said, and the Mountie knew he meant he was sorry for not keeping Moira away.

"I don't like this at all. We need to move. Quickly." The Mountie looked at Moira's feet and then at Sonya's footwear. Both women were in heels but Sonya's were moderate. "Just tell me why it is that you always wear silly shoes in bad situations?" he demanded of Moira, recalling one of the things that had annoyed him during their relationship. Butterscotch wouldn't be caught wearing spiked heels when there was any possibility of needing to walk on unpaved surfaces.

"I do not wear silly shoes into bad situations," she hissed back, finally ready to be offended. "This isn't supposed to be a bad situation and these shoes are very fashionable."

"If this isn't a bad situation then why am I here?" he demanded. Her guilty look answered that question. Chuck shook his head but left it. "Well, whatever your reasons, it's good we are here. Something is very wrong with this setup."

Just then a power floodlight washed over them.

"Don't move." the amplified voice commanded.

Chapter 6

Breakfast at the Moose could have been tricky but neither the Flowers nor Big John was inclined to burden their guest with conversation. Nor was the morning table at all a bed and breakfast sort of scene. There were no china teapots sitting on lace doilies, no crumpets, no scones. Desoto was so grateful for the silence and the strong black coffee that he never mentioned his lactose intolerance.

He had worried that the Flowers might still be erupting over Ricky's nighttime jaunt, but if lava was heaving inside she was outwardly quiescent. Of Ricky there was no sign so he was able to eat without any talk of newts.

Though Butterscotch had been adamant about not going to the Sasquatch graveyard, he found that he was curious about it and was busy persuading himself that just looking in the area wouldn't hurt anything. And the old guy, Horace, seemed pretty curious too. Perhaps he would look the old man up after breakfast and suggest they take a walk in the forest in the general direction of the forbidden cemetery.

* * *

It was morning and Chuck was glad to be alive to see it. Things had been touch and go for a while last night.

"My name is Charles Goodhead and I am with the RCMP," he had said firmly, hoping that announcing his ties to law enforcement wasn't a fatal mistake.

"Cool it, David. These guys are fine," Moira had said, straightening. She threw Chuck a haughty look and he took that to mean that he was no longer the object of her desire. "Come on, Sonya. We don't need the muscle anymore."

The floodlight went out and Moira stomped off through the needles and leaf litter, making every effort not to teeter on her heels.

"Thank you for everything," Sonya murmured and then with a longing glance at Anatoli, she hurried after Moira.

"I'm an idiot," Chuck said, staring after the women. "An absolute idiot."

"We all are, my friend, when females are involved." He clapped Chuck on the shoulder and holstered his weapon.

Chuck did the same and they turned toward the car.

"I wonder if there is any way I can keep this from Butterscotch," he asked the evening air.

"Why would you want to? Your motives were pure, the cause noble. If anyone will understand, it is Butterscotch."

Chuck considered this and finding it a valid point, he began to feel happier.

"Yeah. And now we can go home. If we drive all night we can be back in Seven Forks by morning."

Anatoli, being a true friend, did not point out that he would prefer not to drive all night.

* * *

Horace did not require much persuasion, though he did insist on bringing a shotgun and making sure that Ricky wasn't with them. Usually good with directions, at least in the city, Desoto knew that he would have been lost very quickly without the older man there to guide him. The country was perplexing. Glaciers had carved up the hills into uneven ruts that challenged even the strongest ankles braced by the best hiking boots, and the uneven lurching made his shoulder ache more with every jolting step. The belts of forest they passed through in the gullies' extremities, though not especially lofty, were dense and ill-disposed to company, resenting even the small space needed by a pair of humans to pass between them.

"I'm not positive of the location," Horace said for the third or maybe fourth time.

"But this is the general direction?" At first this questioning response had been enthusiastic. Now it was just weary. Had he been a less stubborn man, he would have done the sensible thing and returned to the Moose for a nice venison burger and a nap.

"Wait. This is a dead end." Horace had said this a lot too. Desoto suppressed a sigh as they had to scramble back up another

ridge and down another gully, avoiding patches of loose shale and boulders that seemed inclined to topple on their heads as soon as they passed. They repeated this process a dozen times, stopping only twice for coffee and a rest. There were no landmarks, just more of the same as they walked and walked under the shifting sun, and Desoto began to wonder if they were scrabbling in circles. You couldn't judge from the sky that was either too huge or too slight, depending on whether you were looking at the thin strip of blue from the depths of the wooded canyon or surrounded by the eye scorching three-hundred-and-sixty blueness when standing on a bald ridge.

Horace remained confident though that they were nearing the location and, more importantly, that they were not lost and that he could find his way back to the Gulch.

Chapter 7

I didn't see Horace and Desoto slipping away and didn't spot them until they were out on Potters Ridge. I wouldn't have seen them then except I was up on my roof, watering the container garden. I know that the rooftop is not a normal place for pots and barrels, but I do not have a fenced yard and the deer had been helping themselves to the all-you-can-eat buffet of my zucchinis and tomatoes and herbs. Moving the pots onto the mossy roof was the last resort and involved hammering on a kind of bracing rail to hold the pots in place on the steep incline. Well, shooting the damned vermin was the real last resort, but I didn't much fancy getting up in the dark of night to kill animals. Besides, setting off a gun at night would rouse the whole town and cause unnecessary alarm and maybe some hilarity. It was easier to move pots.

Though I had no reason to believe that Desoto and Horace were doing anything besides going fishing or to play with fireworks, my suspicious nature recalled that both of them had an interest in the Sasquatch graveyard and it leapt to the conclusion that this was where the men were going.

"Come on, Max," I called down to my wolf as I pulled off my gloves and scrambled for the ladder. "We're going hiking."

Max woo-wooed enthusiastically.

* * *

The sounds around them were bizarre, sly, nothing like Desoto was used to in the city. At first the noise was meaningless but then growing more important when there was nothing new for the eyes to see and the ears became the important news-gathering organs. He couldn't identify what he was hearing though, beyond a wandering breeze in the rocks and sometimes the whine of some kind of bee or wasp or maybe a strange bird.

He thought of what Butterscotch had said. The place was *unquiet*.

After a long morning of walking, they finally came to a yawning gorge, one that couldn't be crossed except by walking

over the preposterously small and sagging tree trunk that spanned the dark gap in a makeshift bridge.

Desoto wasn't particularly afraid of the bears that were supposed to haunt the local woods, since he had seen no sign of them. Nor did he fear—not really—some local tribe of Indians. It was also highly unlikely that any of Ricky's "bad men" were hiding out in the underbrush. He wasn't especially afraid of heights either, as long as it was heights in a building. But he found that he was actually afraid of falling into that dark abyss. Gazing down into the canyon, all he could see were murky shadows and the edges of sharp rocks.

That would be a bad way to die. Embarrassing too.

Horace turned to look at him. His expression was worried.

"This is it. Do you still…?"

"I don't know. That tree looks half rotten. I don't know if it would take our weight."

"Yeah."

The two men stared at each other, pondering the odds and weighing how much damage their esteem would suffer if they turned back before their goal.

"Oh hell." Screwing up his courage, and focusing on the opposite ledge, Desoto stepped out onto the skinny trunk, testing it cautiously. The dying trunk moaned but held.

* * *

Their trail was easy to follow because they were careless about tramping down shrubs and weeds. Distances are hard to judge in the woods, but I knew I was getting close to the cemetery when the stale air began to smell like an animal had been panting in it, and Max stopped looking pleased by our outing. Far too soon for my taste, we reached the familiar tree that spanned that damned ravine. Age had not improved the tree's appearance and I marveled that the two men had been brave enough—okay, stupid enough—to cross it.

Usually Max likes to lead the way, but he paused there, looking back at me, his wise eyes asking, *Are you kidding? You want to cross that?*

Before I could decide if I, too, were stupid enough to cross the ravine, I heard a rustling in the shrubbery. It was a large rustling that might be made by two careless men moving quickly. Or two bears. Or two something much worse.

Max didn't growl but his fur stood on end, doubling his size.

Shit. Bears would have brought howls and humans wags of his tail. Something much worse was getting closer.

I put my back to a tree and raised my shotgun to my shoulder. Killing one of the Big Bones was the last thing I wanted to do, but I might not have any choice. And I was still on our side of the draw. This was *our* territory. If they attacked, I was in the right.

And if they went after Horace and Desoto on the other side of the gorge?

* * *

Desoto stared at the cairn. Because it was a cairn. Sloppy maybe, but deliberate, and there was no mistaking that it was a grave of some kind. A very big grave. Drawing a deep breath, he stopped acting like a stupid fish out of water and put on his detective's hat and coat.

The primary impression of the cemetery was that this wasn't a spot of backwoods that would ever be made into botanical gardens or a campground. It wasn't created with humans in mind. The underbrush was aggressive, enemy of anything that didn't move on four legs or have wings, and the unsteady cracked stones of the forest floor were waiting and eager to snap human bones. The proportions of the space were also scaled in such a way as to be too large for comfort and without being in any way attractive or impressive enough to rate a ten-cent postcard or even a casual vacation snapshot, though Desoto decided take some pictures anyway.

Horace didn't say anything as he took out his phone and began snapping, but Desoto figured that the old man had probably begun to believe that maybe they weren't dealing with just some old Indian cemetery. Tall and hirsute natives his ass. This place was…. Something else.

Unquiet. Yeah. Maybe even haunted. Whatever was buried here, it wasn't quite dead and buried enough. The feeling that they were observed was strong and the watcher was not friendly.

The idea that this might actually be something other than a human burial ground was slight at first, so packed in by previous beliefs about what was and was not possible that the notion could barely sprout at the back of his unimaginative mind, but the moment he relaxed his guard it began to root and grow.

Unquiet. Sasquatch. Detectives relied on intuition and his was telling him to get out of this unhuman place.

"Detective," Horace began in a rough whisper.

"Yeah, I've seen enough. Let's go. And for Godsake, don't touch anything."

* * *

The Mountie stood inside the cabin, feeling a bit let down as well as exhausted. Butterscotch wasn't there. Her gardening tools and gloves were on the old bench outside the door, but Max and his wife—and her shotgun—were gone.

He stepped outside the cabin, ready to head for the Moose, when shots were fired in the woods. They were distant and echoing, meaning they had bounced off several ravine walls. Gunshots meant nothing. People hunted all the time, but his stomach clenched and without considering, he checked his own side arm and then headed for the forest at the best speed he could manage.

* * *

They moved with haste but also with as much quiet as they could achieve, and Desoto let Horace decide which ways were safest. Whatever had upset the hair follicles on his neck, it was something he had no wish to tangle with, and he was okay with pushing his body to the limits to avoid it.

Behind them there came a breaking of limbs and a snarl that was closer to a lion than to anything else Desoto had ever heard. Certainly the noise was not human.

Neither man said anything, but they redoubled their speed. Finally the chasm came into view. Desoto was relieved but also horrified. The crossing looked worse from this side.

Horace skidded to a stop.

"Get across!" Butterscotch's voice ordered and Desoto finally saw her in the shadows, taut with tension and with her back to a tree. Her shotgun pointed slightly over their heads. Beside her the wolf was silent but puffed up like a cat confronting a stray dog. Max had never appeared so savage and wild.

"Cross now, or I'll let them kill you." Her voice was flat as she made the threat and Desoto decided to believe her.

Horace also took her words to heart and raced across the rotting log. Desoto, not looking down, followed. He didn't feel the jolts and sways of Horace's passing because his leaping gait allowed him to touch wood only twice as he jumped the ravine.

They had barely crossed the fearsome gap when Butterscotch stepped forward and shot at the end of the tree nearest her feet. It took two blasts, but the ancient wood gave way under the assault and the tree toppled into the ravine.

"Go!" she ordered them, backing away from the chasm, keeping the shotgun trained on the shrubbery on the other side of the ravine though it had gone eerily silent. "Run and don't stop until I tell you."

Desoto made note of the fact that she was not confident that the lack of a bridge would keep whatever was behind them from crossing. It was only when they entered the dense shrubbery that she lowered her gun and turned her back. She again ordered them to hurry.

"Follow Max."

Panting and dripping with sweat, Desoto didn't argue. It came as a surprise to realize that he had never been so frightened. Guns, bombs, mobsters, and killers of every ilk he had faced and had conquered his natural unease. But whatever was behind him was worse than any of that and even his curiosity had decided that it didn't need to see it up close.

* * *

The Mountie didn't have time to feel relief when he saw Desoto, his father, and Butterscotch running at him through the trees. They were alive but something was chasing them, something Max wouldn't howl at.

"Damn." He drew his weapon but turned smartly and also began running. They were taking a longer way back to the Gulch but it was the safer path. More flat and open. Butterscotch, or maybe Max, had chosen it because a broken ankle could be death.

"Let me guess," he gasped, falling in beside her.

"Yeah, they went to see the graveyard of Big Bones," she panted back.

"Did you actually see them this time?" the Mountie asked.

"No, but I heard them and they were pissed off."

They reached Potters Ridge and Butterscotch finally slowed. Horace was dangerously red in the face and Desoto was as pale as old socks.

"Everyone take a breather. It isn't likely they will follow us out here," Butterscotch said, slumping onto a boulder. She sat heavily but in spite of her words, she kept her eyes and gun pointed at the woods behind them. Max sat right beside her. His fur was flat but his posture was watchful.

"Agent, you are the color of ash. Are you hurt?" she asked, throwing a quick glance at Desoto. It was half concern and half anger.

"I shouldn't jog on a full stomach," he said between deep breaths. "It used to make me sick in PE."

"Hm. Hey, Mountie," she said, finally turning to look at Chuck. "Glad you're home."

"It's good to be home, though a slightly less eventful homecoming might have been nice."

Chuck turned to frown at his father.

"I know!" Horace said. His breathing was slowing and Chuck decided that he wasn't having a heart attack. "We were idiots. I just couldn't believe…."

"Well, now you know," Butterscotch said shortly. "Please tell me you didn't touch anything."

"We didn't," Desoto assured her. "It felt so wrong that we left almost at once."

"Then let's hope it's enough," she said tiredly.

"Enough?" Horace asked.

"Enough that they don't retaliate for the intrusion."

* * *

I had trouble falling asleep that night in spite of Chuck's arms folded tight around me. It wasn't just that I was thinking about Chuck's adventures with an old girlfriend or the fact that I hadn't told anyone else about what Horace and Desoto had done. I was listening for sounds in the night that said the people of the Big Bones had come to call and praying that they didn't. But Max remained calm and I finally decided that enough was enough and I rolled over a final time and went to sleep.

The next day dawned, clear and glorious, and Max and I took a cup of coffee out onto the bench beside the cabin door and enjoyed Nature's magnificent show.

Chuck was still sleeping. And maybe still dreading that I would make him pay for what he had done and for keeping secrets. But of course I wouldn't. If there was anyone in the world who understood that people came with pasts, and that sometimes they caught up with us, it was the residents of the Gulch. And, here, everyone got a second chance.

I had a feeling that Agent Desoto would be leaving us soon, that whatever answers he had been searching for, the answers had all been found.

Max woofed softly and Chuck appeared in the doorway. His hair was messy and he had blanket face.

"Hi," he said and smiled tentatively. He made a futile effort to smooth his cowlicks.

"Want some pancakes?" I asked and smiled with genuine happiness that he was home.

"Pancakes would be great," he said and smiled back.

Chuck and I were going to be okay. Probably Desoto would too. But if he wasn't … well, my sphere of influence is small and I had my hands full with those in McIntyre's Gulch. The agent would have to look after himself.

* * *

Desoto dropped his pack on the grass and looked over at the Wings, wondering if it was a mistake to accept a ride from him. It was the fastest way back to civilization, but by no means the safest.

"This trip going to be any better than the last one?" he asked, rubbing his shoulder.

The Wings grinned unrepentantly.

"Well, you know, Agent, that all depends on the weather."

"Huh," Desoto grunted and retrieved his duffel. "Then let's get this show on the road."

He was mentally working on his letter of resignation. They would probably try to get him to stay on, but he had seen that there were more things in heaven and earth than dreamt of in Bureau philosophy and it was time he got on to seeing them.

Unless they made him a really, really good offer. Then he might consider a slight delay.

Make Over

by

Melanie Jackson

Chapter 1

Is that Mr. Adams walking my way? I asked myself just as I began to swing the hammer. Missing the head of the nail by a good two inches, I brought the head of the hammer down firmly on my left thumb, which I was using to hold a piece of siding in place.

"Son of a …" I began, dropping the hammer and pulling the work glove from my damaged hand with my teeth.

That's when I looked up and saw that it was indeed Mr. Adams, the foreman of the siding crew, walking my way along the newly repaired wraparound porch. Knowing how little he liked "that sort of language around the work site," especially coming from one of the ladies, I quickly amended the oath I was about to utter.

"… sea cook!" I concluded as I spit the glove from my mouth.

"What's the matter, Boston?" Mr. Adams asked, coming to a halt before me. "Not enough coffee this morning? Did you decide to wake yourself with a good whack to the thumb?"

"Yes, sir, but I'll be alright," I replied sullenly as I examined my throbbing digit.

After all, I was trying to impress Mr. Adams and the rest of the boys who I suspected didn't think I was good enough to be on a work crew. This was not an unusual position for me to be in considering my work environment at the Hope Falls Police Department, only this time I had a chance to set the record right from the outset. So I had watched the men at work and had observed how they swung a hammer and had been working at sinking nails with a single blow ever since. Only I wasn't very good at it yet and the least distraction could send the head of the hammer flying in unintended directions—like toward my thumbs.

"You know, Boston, you've managed to surprise me," Mr. Adams said. "For being such a wisp of a thing, you do good work."

I did do good work. It turned out that I had an affinity for lining up and pounding down siding. In fact, I'd become so good at siding during the last several days that some of the less experienced amongst the men actually came to me to help them with the trickier parts of their own siding projects. I had even surprised myself. For some unexplainable reason I had an inherent

gift for lining up and cutting siding. Even given the uneven old house we were working on, I was able to make the straight lines all come together.

Alex had thought I was crazy the day I told him that I wanted to spend my two weeks of vacation helping to renovate the old Stubbs place. I had reached the point that I either needed to use my vacation days away from work or lose them. Over the past several years I had tried to take vacation, but my vacation days always ended up turning into working days as I uncovered one crime after another. The Chief insisted that they didn't count. Now I was in danger of exceeding the number of vacation days that one could accumulate on the books. Unfortunately, when the deadline finally arrived for me to trade in my days for a taste of freedom Alex was suddenly socked in with an important project that he needed to work on. Rather than leave town on my own, I looked around Hope Falls for a pleasing way to spend my free time and stumbled upon the Stubbs Mansion Renovation Project.

It turned out that the project was looking for able-bodied people and I had always had an interest in construction, so I joined up. Only when I reported for duty the first day did I find out that they wanted me to sweep the floors, feed the crew, and answer the phones, all of which I refused to do.

"I didn't volunteer on a construction project so that I could play nursemaid to a bunch of overgrown boys. I want to swing a hammer," I insisted.

No one had taken me seriously except for Mr. Adams, who took me on as a member of the ailing siding crew. And as I already pointed out, I was a natural at it. The rest was, as they say, history. After only a few days I had effectively become Mr. Adams' right-hand woman as we were rapidly moving from repairing the siding to painting.

"Here, let me look at that," Mr. Adams said, taking my hand to examine it. "Yep, as I said, you do a good job. Even when it comes to whacking your own thumb you do a fine job of it."

"It will be okay," I insisted, not wanting to make a big deal over my silly lapse in focus.

"Actually, it will hurt like the dickens for the next several days after it turns purple then black."

"Black?"

"That's right," he replied, returning my thumb to me with a smirk.

Black is not a pleasing color, especially when it comes to the color of my digits. I would for instance never wear black nail polish, preferring instead the subtler tones of pearl or even clear. I could only imagine what Alex was going to say when he saw my aching thumb at the end of the day. I knew that I could expect little sympathy from that quarter.

"So, what can I do for you, Mr. Adams?"

It was strange that nobody referred to Mr. Adams as Dan. For me this was due not only to the fact that he was my senior by a couple of decades, but because no one on the project, including the older gentlemen, referred to him by his first name. Possibly it was due to the fact that Mr. Adams presented himself as the boss in all situations. In fact, I think that he still held his contractor's license.

"Chloe, I've been wanting to talk with you about taking on more responsibility on this project," Mr. Adams began.

I perked up and started paying closer attention, not just because my usefulness on the project was about to be recognized but because more responsibility could just be a euphemism for more work.

"What did you have in mind, Mr. Adams?" I asked suspiciously.

"I was thinking of placing you in charge of the siding and painting detail while I move on to focus on some other important projects."

Now we're talking, I thought to myself. He was offering me a management position. True, it was a low-level management position, way low-level management—for instance, I doubted I'd receive the keys to the executive restroom, primarily because there was none—but it was management all the same.

"I'd be happy to, sir," I replied in relief.

"Of course, the job would come with its downsides."

"What specifically did you have in mind?" I asked, once more on the defensive.

"For example, keeping Mr. Peterson in line," Mr. Adams replied with a tentative cock of his eyebrow.

I hadn't thought of that. Mr. Peterson was our problem child, the black sheep of the project. Though you might assign him to a very well-defined task he was more likely to while away the hours swapping tall tales with the men, flirting with the ladies, or sleeping. Mr. Peterson used to work as a supervisor at the local saw mill until he retired, but truth be told I suspect to this day that he had never actually worked a minute in his life.

"I see your point," I replied.

"I've talked with several of the men and I'm sure the crew will be happy to work for you."

"That's encouraging."

"Well, if you're interested in the position, you can begin right now."

"By doing what?"

"By going and talking with Mr. Peterson, again, about leaving the other workmen alone while they're on the job."

I sighed as I removed my other work glove and set it next to its mate, then I rose to a standing position.

"Where is he?" I asked.

"Around the front. Ostensibly working on scraping and sanding off the old paint."

"I'll take care of it right away."

"Thanks, Chloe."

I ordered Blue to stay where she was and truth be told she appeared perfectly content to remain sleeping in the shade on the porch. I walked the veranda toward the front of the house and rounded the corner. Sure enough, there was Mr. Peterson sitting back in a comfortable-looking upholstered antique chair someone, certainly not he himself, had dragged out onto the porch from inside the house. This was the first time I'd seen any of the furniture without the covering of an old sheet. The chair was beautiful.

Mr. Peterson was elderly and looked a lot like Santa Claus. Heavy in the middle, he had a white beard and mustache and wore his white hair long though he was bald on top. He even wore wire-framed spectacles and had rosy cheeks. In fact, the only thing that marred the Santa resemblance was the lack of a red suit. Mr.

Petersen wore a striped shirt and jeans held up by suspenders over perfectly clean work boots.

Naturally there was a throng of workmen surrounding Mr. Peterson, listening to him tell one of his enumerable jokes. Unfortunately, I had arrived just in time to hear the punch line.

"The foreman walks up to one of his workers, who he finds is throwing away half the nails in a box, and asks him what he's doing. The workman replies, 'The head on every other nail is on the wrong end.' "

This awarded Mr. Peterson a polite guffaw or two. Having heard him tell this particular joke many times in the past, I knew that he wasn't through.

"The foreman slaps the worker upside the head and says, 'You idiot, those nails are for the other side of the house.' "

All the men ringing Mr. Peterson broke out in genuine peals of laughter this time. Smiling proudly at having told a ripper and thus succeeding in remaining the center of attention, Mr. Peterson's smile began to sag the moment he spotted me considering him from the corner of the house.

"Uh-oh, here comes trouble," he exclaimed. "Gentlemen, I'd like you to meet my new boss, Mrs. Chloe Boston. She's one of those newfangled liberated women who kept her maiden name after getting married."

I knew most of the workers who smiled at me as I resumed my approach. One or two of them were gentlemen enough to tip their hardhats in my direction. All of them waited to witness my first official act as the new lead of the siding and painting detail.

"Time to break it up, boys," I announced. "After all, Mr. Peterson here has work that he needs to get back to."

"I have plenty of time to finish my work before the end of my shift," Peterson countered irascibly.

"That may be so," I replied, "but these men have to get back to work as well."

With this pronouncement I began to shoo the men away with the backs of my hands. They grudgingly peeled themselves off the porch and the side of the house and proceeded to leave.

"Aw gee, Mrs. Boston," one of the workmen grumbled as he turned and walked away. Not all the volunteers had understood that they would be doing actual work.

I felt like an old harpy having to hound the boys back to work. Mr. Peterson remained glued to his seat, glaring up at me.

"Now, Mr. Peterson," I began once the other workmen had left. "What do you say you put that chair back inside the house where you found it and we both get back to work?"

"I don't see why I should. I didn't bring the chair out in the first place," Mr. Peterson countered. "It's my back you know. It wouldn't tolerate such strenuous activity."

I didn't ask why he had volunteered for this project. That would just lead to more stories.

"Well then what do you say I take the chair back inside while you get to work?" I amended.

"Suits me," the old man said, coming slowly to his feet.

While Peterson continued to glare at me, I dragged the heavy antique chair back into the house. I must say that the heavy work did little to improve my own aching back. Eventually I found a likely place for the chair in the front parlor. The sheet that had been covering the piece of furniture was lying on a covered sofa. I draped the sheet back over the chair and turned to encounter a most unpleasant sight.

"Why, Chloe Boston. Whatever are you doing rearranging the furniture?"

It was Pricilla Copeland looking suspiciously down her long slender nose at me.

"I was returning a chair that Mr. Peterson chose to recline in on the front porch," I explained, in no mood to take any guff.

"I do wish that you'd keep your workmen out of the house. That includes you. After all, you are in charge now, aren't you?"

Pricilla accompanied her question with a smirk that showed she didn't respect me and probably disapproved of my new appointment. I felt the hairs on the back of my neck and forearms begin to bristle in anger.

Pricilla Copeland was the president of the Hope Falls Historical Society and in that capacity she was at least nominally in charge of the entire restoration project, not that Mr. Adams

would agree with that assessment. Pricilla tended to keep out of Mr. Adams' hair and the hair of most of the other workers as well. In fact, she managed to stay out of everyone's hair except for mine. She seemed to actually go out of her way to give me a hard time. That and the fact that she was always so impeccably dressed irritated me to no end every time that it was my misfortune to come into her presence.

Pricilla was indeed decked out to the nines this afternoon. Her outfit and matching jewelry were exquisite. The dead animal she chose to wear wrapped round her shoulders was offensive. However, she was one of Tara Lee's close friends, so she had to be tolerated though even that limited amount of patience was a challenge to muster. In any event, one couldn't argue against the fact that it would be a shame to ruin such a beautiful fur wrap.... Then again....

Today Pricilla was being dogged by a humbled-looking toady I took to be her husband—poor man.

"Pricilla, don't you have more important things to do then waste your time irritating me," I tried.

"Just so," she agreed dismissively. "As a matter of fact I'm about to conduct this week's board meeting right here in the Stubbs Mansion, that is if the library furniture is all still intact."

"I think you'll find everything as you left it," I growled.

"Good, then I'll be leaving you now."

In my opinion she couldn't have left soon enough.

"Are you two at it again?" I heard Tara Lee ask as she strolled into the room to join us. "I do declare that I wish you two could bury the hatchet and get along."

"She'd probably be more likely to bury the hatchet in my back," I murmured, just loud enough to be heard.

"Oh Chloe, you're so gouache," Pricilla replied.

"Oh Pricilla, you're such a...."

"Now now, you two," Tara Lee interjected, preempting the earthier portion of my response.

Before any more words could be exchanged, Tara Lee took Pricilla by the arm and led her away, distracting her with questions regarding cataloging the books in the library. Pricilla glared at me over her shoulder as she walked away and eventually turned her

attention back to Tara Lee as she gave her response, which I could not hear.

"It would be nice if you two could get along," I heard Agatha Jackman observe as she drew near. "After all, you're both on the same side."

Agatha and Lawrence were both on the board of the historical society and were therefore required to attend the weekly meetings. I was almost as happy to see them arrive as I was to watch Pricilla leave. I gave Agatha and Lawrence both a mock hug since I didn't want to transfer whatever muck that might be stuck to my work duds to their dress clothes.

"You both have fun at your meeting now," I said as encouragingly as I could muster, then I turned and stepped out the front door of the house.

Sure enough, what did I find but Mr. Peterson telling yet another tall tale to two of the elderly female members of the board.

"And that's how I came to be known as the Masked Avenger of Bartlett Hill, and don't let anyone know of my secret identity now, you hear?"

The ladies giggled appropriately as Mr. Peterson smiled broadly, that is until he once again spotted me watching him from the doorway.

"Not you again."

"Shouldn't someone be working on scraping the siding instead of jabbering?" I asked, folding my arms across my chest.

"I was just getting back to it."

"I'm sure you were."

The ladies glared at me as they passed to enter the mansion. I glared back at them. Mr. Peterson glared as well and continued to glare, as far as I know, the whole time that it took me to walk back to my workplace around the corner of the house. Once there I exhaled a heavy sigh of frustration and then bent down to pick up my work gloves. I took a moment to admire the job I'd completed during the morning before restarting my work and felt relieved that this side of the house was almost done—I had only an hour or two more of work to do. My finger was still throbbing, and sure enough it was already turning purple, which made it difficult to slip my work gloves back on.

I lined up a piece of siding and positioned a nail. Fortunately I was able to check another errant swing when I heard a voice interrupt from behind.

"Chloe, I wonder if I could get your help with a siding issue out back," I heard Wilbur Briggs ask timidly.

Wilbur was a member of the siding crew and he was naturally timid in everything that he did. I set down the hammer and nail and released the piece of siding I'd carefully aligned.

"Sure, Wilbur, I'll come and help."

Before we could leave to check on Wilbur's siding project we were set upon by two men arguing vociferously.

"Boston, you need to tell this so-and-so that he's doing his job all wrong," said Hank Smith.

"As you said, it's my job and I'll do it my way, which is quicker," Joe Sprigs countered.

"You hear that, he doesn't care about the quality of his work."

"As if you're the last word in quality."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Hold on you two," I insisted, waving my hands to get their attention. "Why don't you begin at the beginning and tell me what's the difficulty."

So they each described the situation in great detail and with frequent interruptions from the opposite party. In the end I got Hank to promise that he would follow proper procedure as we understood it and Joe to promise that he would mind his own business in the future. The combatants shook hands at my insistence and went back to work. I spent the next hour helping Wilbur resolve his siding issue. The solution proved to be quite simple after I was able to break the problem down into individual steps. Wilbur quickly caught on to what I was doing and took the hammer from my grasp to continue with his work.

By the time I made it back to my own siding project it was almost the end of my shift. I picked up my hammer and nailed on the few boards that were remaining, which granted me the opportunity to step back and admire a finished job well done. I was feeling happy and optimistic as I woke Blue and walked with her back around the porch to the front of the house, really I was. Then I pulled up short when I spotted Mr. Peterson leaning back against

the house, sleeping while sitting atop a short stepladder. Worker safety is important and I almost blew my stack right there and then but instead stood my ground and counted to ten before approaching him.

"Mr. Peterson!" I called, shaking his shoulder.

"What? Who is it? What's happening?" Mr. Peterson grumbled as he slowly came to his senses.

"You fell asleep rather than completing your work," I explained harshly.

"What work? Where am I?"

"You're at the Stubbs Mansion."

"Oh right. What time is it?"

"It's nearly five o'clock," I explained. "Quitting time."

"Good Lord, I've got to get going or I'll be late for dinner. You probably don't know how scolding Mrs. Goldman can become when anyone at the boarding house is late for dinner."

And with that Mr. Peterson slowly lifted his considerable girth off the stepladder and started to waddle away. I was left dumb struck and at a loss for words. I was still standing on the front porch with my mouth agape in surprise and frustration when Mr. Peterson turned to address me one last time.

"Sorry, Chloe," was all he had to say before turning and walking away.

"Sorry?" I repeated to myself as I surveyed the work that still needed to be done.

It took me an additional two hours to finish the scraping and sanding along the front of the house. All the while I cursed Mr. Peterson under my breath for being such a slacker. I also cursed Mr. Adams for putting me in charge of such a slacker. By the time I was done with the siding in the front of the house my back and arms hurt like there would be no tomorrow, as did my thumb that was now throbbing steadily. Once more I stood back to admire the results of my labors, only this time with much less joy and enthusiasm. I was bushed.

"Why, Chloe Boston, you're still getting your work done?" I heard Pricilla say before I saw her step from the front door. "And here I was led to believe that you were one of the faster workers."

"Don't push your luck today, Pricilla, unless you'd like me to sic my dog on you," I threatened.

At the mere suggestion of violence, Blue looked up to me, whined, and then laid her nose down between her paws, obviously unwilling to back up my words with action. Pricilla merely smirked as she bent down to pat Blue on the head. Blue wagged her tail in response to the attention. For some reason I couldn't comprehend, Blue and Pricilla liked each other. This of course irked me even further.

"Be seeing you, Mrs. Boston," Pricilla said as she strolled away.

"Traitor," I said to Blue who just wagged harder.

Agatha and Lawrence bid me good wishes as they left the house and urged me to get home soon and take a warm bath to ease the aches and pains. The elderly women I'd found flirting with Mr. Peterson earlier glared at me once more as they passed. I glared back. Finally, Mr. Adams stopped by to see how I was doing.

"So, how was your first day as boss?" he asked, slapping me on the shoulder.

"Ouch," I replied since my shoulder and every other inch of my body was sore. "I was actually thinking of how much I'd like to resign."

"That bad, was it?"

"Bad enough."

"First days are always miserable. I encourage you to stick with it. Things will get better over time."

"I doubt that, but I'm leaning toward sticking with it all the same."

"Good man," Mr. Adams blundered. "I mean woman."

Mr. Adams helped me carry my tools to the storage locker where they were locked away. I went back to retrieve Blue and lead her to my car. I was glad that I hadn't ridden the trike today since I would have been too stiff and sore to peddle it home. Blue still didn't especially like the car rides but she was getting better about not ralphing—thank goodness.

Opening the door to our duplex I was surprised to be greeted by the unmistakable aroma of Italian food cooking. Stepping to the dining room door I was further shocked to find the table set for an

intimate dinner for two. Just then Alex stepped out of the kitchen carrying a steaming hot pan heaped full of eggplant parmesan which he set in the center of the table.

"Welcome home, darling," he announced, placing his hands on my shoulders and leaning in close for a kiss.

"Oh, Alex."

"What? You didn't remember that this is the way all couples without kids spend every evening? Now, why don't you go slip out of your work duds and have a shower while I finish with the salad."

I didn't argue with him. And the shower felt wonderful. I wore nothing but a warm robe and fuzzy slippers back to the dinner table which was still waiting for me. Alex held my chair for me as I sat and then served me a heaping portion of his exquisite Italian eggplant dish before filling my wine glass.

"So, how did your day go at work?" he asked.

"Terrible."

"Oh?"

"Yes, I got promoted to the lead of the siding and painting crew."

"But that's good news, isn't it?"

"That's what I thought when I was first offered the job."

We continued to exchange small talk about our days as we enjoyed the wonderful meal. Alex wasn't much of a chef but he did know how to make one mean eggplant parmesan. By the time we'd finished eating I was stuffed and starting to feel sleepy. The combination of wine and hard work was beginning to take its toll.

"You cooked, so I guess I get to do the dishes," I said, rising from the table to gather the dirty plates and silverware.

"That's alright, don't bother yourself. I can take care of the dishes as well," Alex suggested in a tension-filled moment.

"But Alex, that wouldn't be fair. Besides, it shouldn't take long to do a few dishes?" I countered as I stepped toward the kitchen door.

"Really, honey, I assure you that I'm on top of this," he continued.

"Why, Alex, what are you hiding?"

"Chloe, don't go in there."

"Why not?"

I stepped through the kitchen door and stopped dead in my tracks. The place looked like a bomb had gone off in it. Dirty pots and pans were strewn everywhere. There was flour on all the countertops and on the floor. Somehow, Alex had even managed to get pasta sauce on the ceiling. Now I ask you, how do you get pasta sauce on the ceiling?

"Oh, Alex," I sighed, feeling my shoulders sag in exasperation.

"You can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs," he responded by way of either explanation or apology—which didn't matter since it wasn't working in either case.

I set our dishes down on the counter, took a deep breath, and only had to count to five.

"I'll start with the dishes while you clean the counters and the floor," I suggested. "Deal?"

"Deal."

I didn't make it to bed until very late that night. I was surprised that I enjoyed spending the evening cleaning the kitchen with Alex as much as I did. We laughed a lot that night and used soap bubbles from the sink to make fake beards and hairdos on each other. But by the time we finished cleaning, my knees were beginning to shake like they were getting ready to give. My eyes closed before my head hit the pillow. I could tell that Alex was feeling amorous but even he, a male fully in tune with his male instincts, was able to recognize that there was no way that I'd be performing that evening.

I slept the sleep of the dead right up until the alarm woke me early the next day.

Chapter 2

I woke the next morning feeling at odds over my new position on the renovation project. I knew the promotion was no big deal but I was still proud of it. At the same time I was feeling the heavy burden of leadership. Rather than encumber Alex with my conflicted interests I remained silent which he didn't seem to mind at all. He happily read his paper and sipped his coffee while ignoring me entirely. I munched on my cereal and slurped my coffee while staring at the table in a daze. When it came time to leave, I kissed Alex on the forehead and took Blue with me to my waiting car where I continued to bemoan my options as I drove.

All morning I felt as if I had a cloud hanging over my head, most of it caused by my work on the project. Again, there were more than the usual number of interruptions, but I managed to address them and get my own work done. I intentionally avoided any thought or sight of Mr. Peterson talking or sleeping. By the time lunchtime rolled around I was an agitated mess, both loving my work on the restoration project and wanting to quit at the same time.

I was on my way with Blue to lunch when I was distracted from my thoughts by an unsettling sight. I pulled to the curb to watch a homeless man I'd seen many times in the past as he searched for whatever he might be looking for in a back alley dumpster. My heart snapped at the sight of the man and the realization that I was fully capable of doing something to help him. Rather than pass the man by, as I'd done every time before, I resolved this day to play the Good Samaritan and do something not just for this single man but to benefit of all mankind. Before leaving my vehicle, I raised the windows just high enough to insure that Blue couldn't jump out and become a road fatality. She remained asleep in the backseat of my car the entire time, ignoring my actions in her best interests.

As I approached the old man who currently had his upper torso buried deep in the dumpster, I recalled that I'd heard others refer to the man as Dumpster Dave. This was a name I felt to be inappropriate when I'd first heard it but now that I was watching the man in action I realized the name fit him to a tee. I flashed my

most convivial smile as I presented myself to the target of my charitable intentions.

"Hello, Dave." I said in an amicable voice as the bearded man's head reappeared from out of the dumpster.

"Who the hell are you?" the belligerent old man challenged. "I don't know you. This dumpster is public property. Go away."

Dave wore a pair of dirty and torn bib overalls. Beneath that was a waffle weave shirt that had probably been some shade of white when it was new. Now it was stained a dingy gray. His shoes were in tatters as was the Panama hat he wore. His face was filthy, at least the parts that weren't covered by a thick growth of beard. Silver and black were the colors of the hair that ran down to his shoulders out from under his hat. I could smell the man as I neared. For a moment I wondered whether the flies were here after the garbage or had been following Dave.

Dave must have noticed some form of authority in my natural stance since he quickly discarded the tough talk and instead looked as if he was ready to hightail it and run. Ultimately he stood his ground, most likely because he didn't want to be seen in public running away from a woman, especially not one half his size. Whatever the reason, I was glad he'd stayed put since I didn't want to have to chase him down to administer my goodwill.

"Can I help you find something?" I asked awkwardly.

"I'm just fishin' for leavin's in the trash." Dave retorted. "Ain't no crime in that."

"No, sir, of course not." I agreed. "I didn't mean to imply that you were breaking the law. I was just wondering if I could offer to buy you lunch."

"What is this, some sort a sting operation?" he replied as his eyes moved from side to side as if he was looking for a SWAT unit to appear.

"No, sir, no sting operation. I'd just like to take you to lunch."

"Lunch, hey?" Dave responded suspiciously. "I tell you what," he continued with a gleam in his eye. "You give me some money and I'll go buy lunch later."

"But it's lunchtime now."

"That don't matter. I ain't hungry now."

"Well, neither am I," I replied, feeling my intestines doing a slow death roll.

"Then why do you want to take me to lunch?"

My mind did somersaults trying to find a way out of the pit of twisted logic my mouth had dug for it.

"That's beside the point," I blurted. "If I give you money, how do I know you won't spend it on drugs and alcohol?"

"Do I look like the type that would spend good money on drugs and alcohol?"

I gave him the once over, but that's all it took: the once over. I didn't have the heart to tell him straight to the face that to me he looked exactly like the type that would spend good money on drugs and alcohol. I shook my head to clear the nasty thought from my mental palate before opening my mouth.

"Look, sir, why don't you come with me to the corner diner and I'll buy you lunch," I insisted, guiding him by the arm down the street.

The old man didn't resist but he didn't cooperate either. We must have looked like we were dancing as we shuffled down the sidewalk.

"Am I under arrest?" Dave wanted to know.

"No, I'm buying you lunch."

"But I'm not hungry."

"So, have a muffin. Besides, it's the thought that counts," I insisted.

Fortunately, a place named the Corner Diner was on the next corner. We walked past Dave's grocery cart full of dumpster finds on the way there. I marched Dave through the front door of the diner, right up to the counter, and sat him down.

"Help," Dave pleaded with the waitress standing behind the counter.

"What's going on here?" the waitress wanted to know.

Her badge said her name was Gladys. She gave me the once over. We sized each other up pretty quickly and each determined the other was alright.

"My name is Chloe Boston," I explained. "I work for the Hope Falls Police Department and today I'm bound and

determined to do a good deed. The two of you are going to help me. Please feed him."

"Help me. I'm being forced to eat against my will."

I reached into my fanny pack and retrieved a crisp new twenty-dollar bill which I tossed on the counter to emphasize the fact that I was serious in my request. Then I took one last look at Dave, shook my head in annoyance, and turned to leave.

"This is police brutality!"

Even as I stepped out the door I could hear him behind me.

"Can I keep the change?"

I felt discouraged and humiliated by the time I arrived at the restoration site and remained feeling that way the rest of the afternoon. I tried to use work to distract me from thoughts of my morning *faux pas* but was instead constantly interrupted by requests from others that it was now my position to satisfy. One of those requests involved menial assistance needed by a different crew, the concrete crew. I jumped at the opportunity to recommend Mr. Peterson.

I led Mark, the crew lead who had brought me the request for help, to the front of the house where Mr. Peterson was dutifully sleeping off his noon lunch.

"Mr. Peterson," I called quietly while shaking his arm. "Mr. Peterson, wake up." I tried again only this time speaking a little louder. "Peterson, wake up!" I hollered after losing my cool for only the briefest of moments.

"What? Where? Are we under attack?" Peterson sputtered as he became reacquainted with consciousness.

"Mr. Peterson, we have a job for you," I told him, hoping I was getting through the fog of reawakening.

"Alright, alright," Mr. Peterson said, lifting his dairy-air from its place firmly embedded in the cushioned seat of an antique Morris chair. "You don't have to be yelling all the time. I can hear you fine," he clearly annunciated back into my face.

I was about to comment on the Morris chair when Mr. Peterson's body went rigid and his hands shot to his hips. His mouth assumed an "O" shape as did his eyes. I was afraid that he was having a heart attack.

"Mr. Peterson, are you alright?" I asked, stepping to his aid.

"My back. It's my back. I've jammed it again."

"Oh, my goodness," I exclaimed. "Have you pulled a muscle or broken your spine?"

"Slipped a disk. It's an old war wound," he explained. "Battle of Manassas, you know. It will be fine as soon as I get home, take a Vicodin, and sit back in my lounger for an hour or two."

And so I stood upright and watched Mr. Peterson shuffle away, back bent and shoulders hunched so he looked a little like the letter F. I heard laughing from behind me. I turned to find Mark from the concrete crew to be the source of the laughter.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"The First Battle of Manassas was fought in Virginia during the Civil War in the year 1861," Mark explained.

"So you're saying it wasn't a back injury."

"It has been every time Old Peterson couldn't find any other way out of work. But look at the bright side, Peterson apparently likes working for you so much that he's willing to fake an injury to stay."

I put my hands on my hips and glowered at Mark's back as he walked away continuing to laugh. I knew that I would soon be the laughingstock of the project. I was fed up and needed a break, from both the job and the jobsite. I told Mr. Adams as much as I entered the office trailer to hang up my hard hat and gloves. I had a tear in my eye as I said the words.

"I'm leaving early today."

Mr. Adams barely looked up from what he was working on at his desk.

"Chloe? Is everything okay?"

"Fine," I said and I didn't stop walking, simply carved a circle round the center of the office back toward the door. "I just need to get out of here."

"I understand. If you're headed offsite, perhaps you'd cash a check to replenish petty cash?"

Like any office we had a petty cash fund which went up and down in value as it was alternately drained and replenished. Our petty cash box even had a budget which I thought was a little excessive. I suspected theft from the supply cabinet was tolerated

and almost expected by Mr. Adams and the others. At the sound of the boss' question, I stopped but refused to turn.

"What do I have to do?" I called back.

"Go to the bank, cash a check, and bring back the cash."

I thought about it.

"I can do that."

I backed my way toward Mr. Adams, not wanting to turn to face him because my eyes had gotten a little watery from emotion. I reached back a hand to accept the check. Mr. Adams finished writing the check, tore it out of the checkbook with a flourish, and handed it to me without comment. This led me to wonder if any of the other leads of his various work crews tended to tear up their first full day as lead. I groped around for the check behind my back and Mr. Adams slapped it into my hand. I stomped away feeling foolish and humiliated, and as if in the fight between me and the job, the job had won yet another round.

I met back up with Blue as I exited the trailer. We walked with purpose side by side to my car parked at the curb. I let Blue into the backseat. The windows were already rolled at least halfway down. I climbed behind the wheel and wasted no time speeding my way onto the road headed for the Bank of Hope Falls, formerly known as the Hope Falls Savings & Loan. I pulled to the curb just off Main Street in an empty spot in front of the bank and carried the check in my hand as I climbed from the vehicle. I left the car unlocked, stuffed a dime in the meter, and walked into the bank.

I said *hi* as I passed Bert Hazard, the elderly unarmed security guard who stood just inside the front door of the bank. He nodded his head and put his finger to his hat in a half doff but remained sitting back against his stool. Bert didn't provide much protection for the bank, but he did keep his eyes open and the manager of the bank informed. That was apparently worth his most likely limited salary.

I walked across the carpeted floor to an open booth to find Connie Larson smiling back over the half partition at me. I was short and pleased I didn't need to stand on tiptoes to see over the barrier.

"Tough day?" Connie asked.

Was it really that obvious? I asked myself. It must be written across my puffy-eyed face. Well, if you can't hide the fact that you've been crying you might as well share it, I rationalized.

"The worst," I confided.

"I hear you, dear. What you need is an Ativan prescription. Trust me, it evens out all the rough spots."

"I'll have to investigate that."

"Now, what do we have here?" she asked as I handed her the signed check written out to cash. "It looks like the monthly petty cash fund for the Stubbs Mansion renovation project."

"That it is," I agreed.

Connie filled out a form which I signed, then she counted out the cash. Rubber banding the money into a wad I slid it into my purse as I turned to leave. The only problem was that as I turned I was brought up short by a young man wearing a ski mask and holding a nasty-looking black assault rifle. The ski mask was black and plain as was his shirt which he apparently wore inside out. He wore blue jeans and black tennis shoes. He was almost six feet tall and skinny as a willow branch.

"Everybody hold tight and don't panic," the young man shouted. "This is a robbery."

I backed away, automatically shifting my purse into a more protected position behind my body.

"Everybody put their personal possessions into this bag, including your wallets and cell phones," the young man instructed. "Lady, you can begin by placing that large wad of cash I just saw you stuff into your purse in this bag," he said, looking straight at me.

I paused. The gun pointed into my face frightened me. It wasn't long before the gunman realized I wasn't complying with his order.

"Come on, come on," he said nervously, forcing an empty white pillowcase on me. "And you, start filling this with the contents of your drawer," he added, throwing another pillowcase over the counter to Connie.

A thousand disparate thoughts crossed my mind within the next several seconds. I thought about what was happening and realized that it was very wrong. After all, I was now responsible

for the petty cash fund. Should it be stolen I'd be forced to replenish the fund from my own account. More likely Mr. Adams would argue with me and ultimately force me to allow the foundation to absorb the loss, but then there would be harsh words from Pricilla. It would never end. Oh, and Alex and I were having stir-fry tonight.

"No," I replied meekly.

"What did you just say to me, lady?"

"No!" I replied a little louder and with more conviction.

He extended his arm and placed the barrel of his gun against my head. That turned out to be a serious mistake. Looking down I noticed that my assailant had left his groin exposed. I took advantage of this vulnerability by applying maximum shoe leather to his crotch, backed by the full force of my very strong leg. I knew from experience that one didn't need force if the aim was good, but I opted to go for a well-balanced combination of force and placement. In the end I actually caught him with my shin since my foot stretched just beyond his median and was now buried toe deep up my assailant's ass. I felt his gonads pop away from my shin and head in different directions around his waist. Either my kick lifted him off the floor or the surprise and pain of the impact had caused him to spring onto his tippy toes.

The sound he made as he doubled over was awful.

I reached up and grabbed the gun away from my forehead while the young man crumbled to the floor. I didn't have far to look to uncover the gunman's accomplice. He was dressed much like the first youth in jeans, black shirt, and a hood. He pointed a similar-looking assault rifle at my face. The only difference was that this time I had a weapon to point back.

"Drop your weapon!" he screamed, both sounding and looking like he was losing it.

"No!" I screamed back.

I wasn't addressing the situation using the clearest of minds. I knew the situation needed to be defused and could think of only one way to defuse it quickly.

I pointed my gun at the youth's leg and squeezed the trigger. Instead of hearing the deafening roar of an automatic weapon being fired within close quarters, I heard the relatively gentle

thrum of water being pumped out the barrel of the gun to soak the young man's pant leg. No wonder why the weapon had felt so light, I thought. Then I was struck by the realization and shame of what I'd just done, or attempted to do.

"You shot me in the leg," the youth said accusingly.

"Yes. So? It was only a water gun."

"But you didn't know that."

"Did too."

"Did not, otherwise you wouldn't have looked so surprised."

"Did not."

"Did too," the young man insisted.

"Anyway, none of that matters because you're under arrest," I concluded.

Bert Hazard rose from the floor where he'd fallen and had wisely decided to stay while the short-term crisis played itself out. Bert then did the first thing that came to mind. He reached for the fire alarm and pulled the handle. I silently applauded his initiative since I'd yet to hear any sirens approaching. Everyone certainly heard the alarm that went off next.

The young man, whom I'd shot in the leg, turned and ran for the door. Bert placed his arms across his chest and stood his ground in the doorway. The burglar juked right and Bert stepped left. The burglar dodged left and Bert stepped right.

"Get out of the way, old man," the youth demanded.

Bert stood his ground without uttering a word. The Mexican standoff went on for several more moments before the young man turned to call to me.

"Make the old man get out of the doorway," he requested over the sound of the alarm.

Personally, I didn't understand why the young man hadn't simply kept on running. He could easily have bowled Bert Hazard over with no harm coming to himself. Whatever the reason I was glad when the boy stood his ground for Bert's sake. Eventually the burglar slumped to the floor, setting his water pistol beside himself, and started to cry. I examined my own water pistol up close and was surprised that I'd ever fallen for the ruse. The thing looked real enough but it was made of plastic and sloshed water

instead of packing bullets. Surely a police officer would notice the difference immediately.

"Hands up and drop your weapon." Officer Dale Gordon commanded as he stepped into the bank with his gun drawn and aimed.

Aimed at me that is.

Not only had Gordon failed to recognize that the assault rifle in my hand was a fake, he'd failed to recognize me. I shivered to think of the adrenalin rush he was hopped up on while his finger rested on the trigger. In fact, I actually felt more threatened by Dale than I had by the would-be burglar. Sighting down the barrel of his gun with his other eye squinted shut. Gordon's eyes both shot open wide when he eventually recognized my mug.

"Boston? What's going on here?" Gordon asked as he slowly lowered his pistol.

"It's a bank robbery, Gordon. What else do you think it looks like?" I replied, dropping the toy assault rifle on the ground. "Fortunately, I managed to disable one of the robbers and send the other one running."

I pointed out the first robber who was still rolling on the floor and holding tight to his nether region while twisting and moaning. The second robber I pointed out didn't seem to be fairing much better. He was also on the floor rolled up in a ball and moaning just as loudly as the first robber, he just wasn't holding his balls. In many ways I supposed that heartbreaking defeat, as in getting caught robbing a bank with squirt guns, must share much in common with severe physical pain, as in getting kicked in the balls. At least the results appeared to be much the same to me.

The Chief eventually showed up to question me. He told me that it was foolhardy to have refused the request to hand over the project's petty cash fund. I told him that I knew that but I was having a lousy day. The Chief told me to head down to the station in the morning to write and sign a complete statement. I then left for the construction site. Back in the command trailer I handed the cash to Mr. Adams who slipped it into a metal box in his bottom desk drawer.

"Everything work out alright?" Mr. Adams asked me to my surprise.

His question threw me for a second because I thought he was asking about the failed bank heist. It took a moment to realize that he was asking about my change in demeanor since I'd left the office. Once I'd comprehended his question, that was the first time I took a moment to gauge how I was doing mentally with the trauma of having been held captive, though it was only for a short period of time. I felt exhilarated, almost giddy. I tried to hide the smile that burst out onto my face.

"Everything is fine," I concluded.

I worked at the restoration site most of the day right into the early evening hours when I returned home to prepare dinner. I was making stir-fry since both Alex and I were watching after the pounds. Alex's office door was closed which meant that he was working. Not wanting to disturb him I postponed dinner until his door opened and he stepped out of his own accord.

"Hello, sweetness," he said, wrapping his arms around me.

I placed my head against his chest and said nothing. My earlier adrenaline high was gone.

"Uh-oh, what's wrong?" Alex asked.

I started to cry. I didn't stop until Alex's shirtfront was damp. Alex held onto me rocking me back and forth. Regaining my composure I pulled myself from his arms and ran to the bathroom after a Kleenex. I checked in the mirror and found that I looked like hell. I always do when I cry. When I came back, Alex was smiling his crooked smile at me. This made me laugh. I approached him with my head down.

"I'm sorry I was sad," I told Alex.

"We all have our good days and bad days."

"I shot a bank robber in the leg today."

"Tell me more."

"It turned out to be a water gun."

"That makes the story less distressing."

"I forced a homeless man to eat today."

"Wow, you really did have a bad day."

"Yeah."

Once more I was back in Alex's arms with my head against his chest, which is one of my favorite places to be. He comforted

me while I thought over the day's events. I started to laugh and he eventually began laughing with me.

The stir-fry was late but tasted wonderful.

Chapter 3

The old Stubbs Mansion was initially constructed between 1888 and 1891 with extensive remodeling and expansion occurring during the 1920s and 50s. Originally the home of a railroad tycoon, Maynard Stubbs, who had struck it rich hauling freshly hewn redwood trees out of the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range in California, the Stubbs Mansion had started to become a public eyesore soon after the last of the Stubbs had moved out of the mansion in the late 80s. During that time the family's funds started to dwindle as did the condition of the mansion. The land of the estate was slowly sold off until homes abutted the remaining lot. The city now owned the Stubbs Mansion as they did the most famous home in town, the old Burns Mansion. We the people had volunteered to fix up the Stubbs place followed by the Burns place if the city would cough up the funds for such a project. Well, bond measure F passed this last year with a significant majority of the vote and the Stubbs Mansion Renovation Project was officially born.

Though the mansion had had different incarnations of the Stubbs family living in it at different times, the style which could be described only as opulence remained the central theme of the home's construction and furnishing during its entire time in existence. It was true that many of the pieces of priceless artwork which had adorned the walls, tables, and display cabinets were long gone, disposed of as the need for cold hard cash had reared its ugly head. But still what had been left behind as unworthy of effort represented one of the crown jewels when it came to architecture and craftsmanship. It boggled the mind to think of what the mansion must have looked like, inside and out, when in its prime.

These things I already knew about the mansion. The other things I learned later during my breaks when the workmen got together to discuss the day and tell dirty jokes. I also learned a number of lewd jokes that I used to entertain Alex during dinner each night. The stories that intrigued me the most were the ones about haunts and ghouls involving the home and family. One story in particular chilled my body to the bone.

Gary Perkins told the story best because when he did so he could pull a little Irish brogue out of his Boston accent which accentuated the mystery behind the story.

Elizabeth Stubbs was the daughter of old Maynard Stubbs, the original builder and owner of the mansion. She was the youngest of four Stubbs daughters and as it turned out she was also to be the last, her birth resulting in the death of her mother. Maynard never remarried, spending the remainder of his years pining over his lost love and blaming her death on their dumb daughter. For due to complications at birth, Elizabeth was born with developmental problems causing her to lose the power of speech. Maynard also railed against the fact that he had no male heir to whom he could pass his mantle, another irritation the fault for which was laid at young Lizzie's feet.

With such a lurid opening you would think this story would degenerate into an unpleasant litany of the atrocities foisted upon young Elizabeth by her aging and ailing father. But this was not the case, because Lizzie had a secret guardian. No one but Lizzie ever saw her guardian, but others certainly witnessed and experienced the guardian's wrath when they said or did anything against the girl.

No one knew what her secret guardian was to be called since the young girl refused to utter a word, not even his name. According to doctors she possessed the power to speak, she simply chose not to. As the years passed Elizabeth learned her signs and more was revealed about her friend. The fact that her friend was a young man sent a shiver through the family when it was divulged. His good looks and impeccable dress lent speculation and outrage to issues regarding his relationship with Lizzie. Elizabeth signed his name with the simple letter "X."

Rather than having to be convinced, the common belief within the family was that Mr. X was a ghost. Further, family believed that the man was a distant relative brought with the family into the mansion from across the sea, which made a male companion calling upon a female at all hours of the day and night appear proper.

Elizabeth spent a great deal of her time alone inside the house, though no one could truly argue that she ever spent a moment

alone in her life. Her nursemaid insisted that Lizzie had learned to read and write on her own, which was interpreted by all to mean that she was tutored by Mr. X. Though she never left the estate, her father and sisters, and even the servants, had became more and more estranged from her. Sensing a hidden intelligence and eagerness to communicate within the silent Lizzie without pad and paper, it was her nursemaid who had spent a month's wages for the books in the mail out of her own meager allowance. Elizabeth communicated with the family through her nursemaid who translated her signing into words. No one in the family learned more than the rudimentary sign for the crudest words so they could recognize it if they were being sworn at or called names. Though her words were spoken more timidly than Lizzie would have liked, they were her words being spoken out loud.

"I have returned." were the first words she ever signed to her family.

And that's where Gary stopped telling the story. The first time I heard him tell the story I was taken aback at the abruptness of the conclusion. How do you end a story at midpoint like that? What did Lizzie's first words mean? What happened to her? Was Mr. X really a ghost? It turned out that the Elizabeth Stubbs story was one to be fully told through the course of several tellings. Sometimes you heard parts of the story multiple times. The worst thing to happen was hearing story fragments out of order. I wasn't even sure that I'd heard all the parts yet but I had heard enough of them to be cautious about going inside the home. Believe me when I tell you that it wasn't just to hide from Pricilla that I preferred to remain outside.

That Elizabeth Stubbs had returned to wrestle control of the family estate away from her father and sisters didn't become apparent until a later story. Sister Stacy had confided in Lizzie one day that she had missed her monthly call and Elizabeth had taken care of everything very discreetly. In another story she saves a dog only to have to face losing the animal years later. Stories about the dog, Rover, were the most popular of the Elizabeth Stubbs stories. If the disorderly way in which the stories were presented was a distraction, then the way in which the ultimate story concluded was the harshest blow of all. It concluded with the night of a séance, a

ritual with which I was all too familiar. That was one story that Gary refused to tell. Instead, he referenced a magazine in the Hope Falls Public Library. He had placed a magazine on hold so that it would be stored and controlled within the reference library, which forced people to have to read the final story for themselves out of the magazine while in the library. I'd already stopped by the library twice and found the story being read by one of the other workers on the project.

Each day that I heard another story I viewed the mansion and my role on the restoration project in a different light. Rather than detracting from its beauty, the patina of grime and patchwork repairs gave the old girl, as I began thinking of the mansion, a certain dignity. I began to view any blemish as the war wound warn proudly by the winner. And I was proud of my role in working to restore her. My curiosity regarding all things related to Elizabeth Stubbs was overwhelming and I especially yearned to read the final story and find out what had happened the night of the séance. Still, I didn't like going inside the place.

Today was a particularly bright and sunny day which helped to drive away the last of the winter nip that still clung to the air. I took off my coat while I applied the primer. The siding job was now complete and the job had moved on to priming then applying two coats of deep brown paint to the siding. I was pleased that I proved to be as good at climbing ladders with a paint can as I had been working the scaffolding with siding. And I was making excellent progress with the priming on my side of the house.

"Hey, Boston," I heard someone call from the base of my ladder.

I looked down to see that it was Mr. Adams calling up to me, and he was surrounded by a ring of children, two boys and two girls. I couldn't help but feel suspicious as I climbed down the ladder to see what he wanted.

"What can I do for you?" I asked.

"It's these kids, Boston. Steve Hurley brought his kids with him to the jobsite so that he could check on some concrete work on his day off. He left them with me."

"So what's the problem?" I asked, beginning to suspect the worst.

"I'm not real good with kids."

"You can say that again," the oldest boy agreed.

"I was hoping you could take them off my hands for a while. I have a meeting I have to attend."

"How long is a while?"

"Yeah, how long is a while?" the younger of the girls also wanted to know.

"No more than an hour, I'm sure."

"You promise?"

"Yeah, you promise?" the same little girl wanted to know.

I felt as if I was being not so subtly nudged aside by a young lady who needed no help in getting her questions answered. I bent down so that I could talk with her eye to eye.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"I'm very sorry, but I'm not supposed to talk to strangers," the little girl told me.

"Her name is Cheryl," her older brother explained.

"You shouldn't have told her that," the older sister complained. "She could be a criminal type, the type Mom doesn't want us associating with."

"I assure you that I'm not that type," I inserted into the debate.

"That's silly. Mr. Adams is trying to dump us on her so she can't be all that bad," the younger brother added with a smile.

I couldn't be positive but I received the strong impression that the younger boy already had a crush on me.

"You seem to be the team representative," I sad to the oldest boy. "Why don't you tell me all your names?"

"I'm Keith, I'm thirteen which makes me a man in the Jewish faith. Karen is eleven, Jason ten, and Cheryl is eight. She's very precocious."

That certainly accounted for all of them. Keith stood proudly with his arms folded across his chest as he smiled confidently. Karen stood considering me arrogantly with her arms similarly folded and looked bored which she expressed through her idle gum chewing. Jason looked as if he was checking out my breasts. Cheryl looked upon me suspiciously. I noticed that Mr. Adams had already turned and was distancing himself from the scene.

"I'm Chloe Boston. Mrs. Boston I suppose. and I'm a lot older than any of you so I guess that puts me in charge." I said in a less than confident voice. "Who wants a tour of the restoration site?"

"Dad already showed us around this place plenty of times." Keith informed me.

"Well, what would you like to do then?" I asked.

"I want to go home and play Nintendo." Jason replied.

I could see that my breasts provided limited entertainment for the young man though he continued to stare. I was about to suggest that we see how we could help out around the worksite. possibly by picking up scrap wood. when my stress level was ratcheted up another level by the last voice in the world I wanted to hear just then.

"Chloe, have you seen my paintbrush and bucket? I took a short snooze and when I woke they were gone." I heard Mr. Peterson ask.

I looked to the roly-poly man in exasperation but my response was interrupted by the children standing around me.

"Look, it's Santa Claus." little Cheryl exclaimed.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, little girl, but I'm not Santa Claus," Peterson bent down to inform her. "I do know Santa Claus personally if you'd like to hear about it."

"You do not," Keith responded.

"Why don't you listen to the story before casting your verdict," Peterson stood to suggest. "Otherwise you might miss a good story," he added with a smile.

"I'm up for a good story," Jason said.

Karen continued to look bored.

Meanwhile, Mr. Peterson's sudden appearance gave me an idea.

"I know, why don't you all go with Mr. Peterson and listen to his story. I'll keep my eye out for your father and bring him to you once he's out of his meeting. What do you say?"

Keith looked to me skeptically as he considered his options. Jason and Cheryl appeared willing. Oddly enough, it was Karen who broke the logjam by speaking in support of my suggestion.

"We may as well go with the old man," she said grudgingly. "It's obvious that we're not wanted here."

"No truer words have ever been spoken," Peterson confirmed. "Chloe? The brush and bucket?"

"I gave them to Henderson who appeared better prepared to put them to use," I informed him.

"I see," he replied as his face took on a stony expression. "Come, children, it appears that none of us are wanted here."

"Mr. Peterson, you must see the logic behind distributing our resources where they could best be put to use. Henderson needed paint supplies. Yours were sitting right there. I told him to take them."

"I see," he huffed again.

The children gladly deserted me and joined Peterson to look down their noses at me as a grave disappointment. I tried to think of something to say to placate them but came up with nothing.

"I'm going back to work," I finally announced.

I picked up my brush, which had yet to dry out, and a half full can of paint and prepared to climb the scaffolding.

"See you later, Mrs. Boston," Jason said in a pining prepubescent reed of a voice.

I felt like such a heel. I had to stop and hide my face behind my arm until they were gone before I could begin my climb. But then I swiftly ascended into the scaffolding and forgot all about them. I don't know how much time passed. One of the nice things about working on this project was that I couldn't believe how fast time flew. All I knew was that I was interrupted from my work near the end of my shift by Mr. Adams at the base of my ladder.

"Chloe, where are the kids?" he asked with concern in his voice.

The kids, what kids? That's what I thought at first. I gave his question some more thought and was finally reminded of my charges who I had handed off to Mr. Peterson. I figured that it wouldn't be hard finding the old man. I just hoped he'd remained awake.

"They're with Peterson," I said as I descended.

"Gee, Chloe, do you think that's a good idea?" Mr. Adams asked.

"Why? What could go wrong?"

Then I began to imagine all the things that could go wrong leaving children with Mr. Peterson and began to move with haste.

"Peterson? Who's Peterson? Chloe, where are my kids?" Steve Hurley wanted to know.

"Don't worry, Steve," I assured him. "Mr. Peterson is a sweet old man who agreed to look after your kids while I continued to work. He's up at the front of the house right now telling them stories."

"Oh, right, Peterson," Steve replied, seeming to relax a little. "I remember that old guy. He mainly seems to sleep around the worksite."

"That's him," I agreed with a smile.

I led the men around the corner of the building and straight into the middle of where Mr. Peterson and the children were pitching pennies. With how loudly they were cheering themselves on and chiding one another, I was surprised that I hadn't heard them earlier from the other side of the building. Mr. Peterson noticed me first.

"Uh-oh," was all he said as he stood.

The children stopped what they were doing and tried to look innocent. There were five distinct piles of coins lying on the cement sidewalk before the steps leading up to the porch.

"What are you doing, Peterson?" I exclaimed. "Taking their lunch money from them?"

"Actually, they're winning," Peterson corrected.

"Daddy, I'm up a buck twenty-nine," Cheryl announced proudly.

"That's great, honey," Steve said, sweeping his little girl into his arms. "Just great."

I could tell by the look on Steve's face that he didn't believe things were great at all. I couldn't blame him. Mr. Peterson stood in embarrassed silence. I was pretty sure that he was embarrassed at having been caught, not at having done wrong.

"Come on kids, we've got to get going," Steve said, setting his little girl down and guiding his kids away with his hands. "Peterson, I'll talk with you in the morning," Steve said, pointing threateningly at Mr. Peterson before turning to leave.

Keith began to eagerly scoop up the largest piles. The other children knelt to collect their respective piles.

"Leave the money," Steve ordered.

"But Dad, some of the money is ours." Keith complained.

"How better to learn the follies of gambling," his father replied. "Come on, leave the money and come with me."

Cheryl pouted but complied. Karen somehow managed to look even more dour. The two boys began a slapping fight as they followed.

"I told you so." Jason complained to his brother.

"But Dad, pitching pennies isn't gambling." Keith continued to argue as the family disappeared around the corner.

I didn't know quite what to say. I turned away from Mr. Peterson to address Mr. Adams.

"I'm so sorry about this, Mr. Adams," I said.

"But Chloe, let me explain." Mr. Peterson pleaded from behind me.

"It's the end of my shift." I explained to no one in particular. "I'll speak with you tomorrow."

And I walked away without another word. I heard Mr. Adams and Mr. Peterson begin an animated discussion as I left. After cleaning my brush and storing it with the paint can, I hung up my work hat and gloves and gathered Blue for the trip home. I replayed the scene of finding Peterson gambling with the children through my mind as I drove. I continued to dwell on the uncomfortable encounter as I cooked dinner and ate with Alex. Alex read through a computer manual as I grumbled over what I should have done or said instead when I discovered Mr. Peterson and the kids. Worst of all, I began to compose the speech that I was going to make to Mr. Peterson when I got to the worksite the next day.

Thoughts of Mr. Peterson's actions naturally led me to think of other funny or cringe-worthy incidents I'd witnessed at the worksite. I began to take notes. After all, this evening there was to be a meeting of the Lit Wits at the public library. For once I thought I'd show up to a meeting with something to talk about other than the latest case I'd solved. No, I'd wow them this time with my craziest observations from the worksite.

Mrs. Jackman took roll, Tara Lee called the meeting to order, and Mrs. Smith read the minutes from the last meeting which I had failed to attend. It didn't sound like I'd missed much. This time when Tara Lee called for volunteer speakers, she had to call because no one had been scheduled to speak for several weeks now, I raised my hand proudly.

"What is it, Chloe?" Tara Lee asked. "A new murder that you've solved?"

"No, it's some observations that I wrote down about the Stubbs Mansion Renovation Project worksite. I thought people might want to hear some experiences from a real worksite for use in their stories."

"Why, that's very kind of you." Tara Lee responded in surprise. "Please, stand and tell us what you've brought to share with us."

Tara took a seat as I rose. I wondered if what I had to share was worthy of stepping to the podium. Tara Lee's shooing hand gestures caused me to eventually take my rightful place at the head of the group. I don't really like podiums unless I have a stool to stand on.

"Everything I have to say begins with the lead foreman, Mr. Adams, 'the old bastard' as his workmen refer to him behind his back."

"I would hope that any future fictional workmen would not feel the need to use profanity when discussing their superior should they feel the need to talk behind someone's back, which they should of course abstain from doing."

Tara Lee's interruption threw me for a loop for just a second, but soon I remembered what I had to say and began saying it.

"I saw Mr. Adams at his best the day Ernie Summers nearly sawed his hand off. That was probably the most serious injury I heard about at the site and it broke our record of two weeks without an injury. We all laughed when Jimmy Sales fell over because he nailed his boot to the floor using a nail gun. At least we laughed afterward when we found that he'd only nicked the webbing between his toes with the nail that went clean through the boot. Rick Moody set the record for nailing pieces of clothing,

both his and the clothing of others, to the house and even hung himself from an eave by his shirt sleeve. But then he was our most daring and therefore got the tough jobs. Most of them worked out well."

"Chloe, I wonder if I might interrupt for just one moment," Tara Lee interrupted again.

"Yes, what is it?"

"I had thought from your introduction that you were to relate things that had actually happened at the restoration site."

"But I am. These things all actually happened at our site," I explained.

"Oh." Tara Lee exclaimed, assuming a concerned expression. "Please carry on."

It took me a moment to remember my place, but soon I was talking about how Fred Gooding had glued the seat of his pants to the porch by sitting on the lid of the pipe-fitting glue container. I became concerned when Tara Lee began to take notes, considering that she was on the board of the Hope Falls Historical Society.

When I got home that night I asked Alex whether I'd made a mistake talking in front of Tara Lee about the various worksite mishaps I'd witnessed. He didn't think it would matter. I was about to pump him for more information when I received a call from the Chief.

"Boston, we need your help tomorrow," the Chief began.

As long as he didn't need my help right away I could tell it wasn't an emergency. Still I cringed, waiting for the explanation to be delivered. Hopefully the Chief didn't need me to discourage my dad from making a speech somewhere. I hung up the phone feeling uneasy but having agreed to be at Hope Falls Elementary School at eight a.m. the next day.

Chapter 4

I arrived at the elementary school at the prescribed time and made my way straight for the administrative offices. There I was ushered into an all too familiar back room where Officer Bill had traditionally been brought to life. I'd been here before. This time I had a smile on my face knowing that I was here solely in an advisory capacity and would not myself be wearing the ridiculous mascot outfit. I saw Gordon talking with someone across the room by the rear door and headed in his direction.

"What's the deal, Gordon? The Chief said to be down here this morning. Where's the new recruit?"

I would have said *victim* but was afraid the next incarnation of Officer Bill might be within earshot.

"Ri'cheer, purdy lady," the creature beside Gordon announced.

I was brought up short by my first and last encounter with the unfortunate who was slated to don the dreaded costume. I should have been able to smell him the moment I stepped into the room. The stench of body odor mixed freely with the heavy scent of cheap bourbon to produce a heady stench indeed powerful enough to knock a buzzard off a shit wagon, as the creature himself would no doubt proclaim given half a chance. The reject took a heavy hit on a Marlboro and blew smoke rings in my direction. He looked incomplete without a beer in the other hand. I noticed that he wore the Officer Bill body and was using the head to prop the door open. There were children watching the recruit's actions from outside the door where they stood in orderly lines at attention.

I grabbed the recruit by the lapels of his Officer Bill shirt and pulled him staggering back into the room and out of the sight of the children.

"How could you show yourself to the children smoking and without your head?" I demanded.

"Hey, lady, don't talk to me. He's in charge," the man said, pointing to Gordon.

"And what do you have to say for yourself?" I challenged Gordon.

"Hey, Boston, I don't know what's going on. The Chief just told me to let you handle the situation since you're the only one who can do anything about it. That's a quote."

It didn't take long for me to recognize the intent behind the message and it was blackmail. The Chief knew that there was no way that I would allow this miscreant to step out in front of a group of children wearing a Hope Falls Police uniform, even should that uniform display a gold felt star instead of the actual silver badge. Well, the joke was on him because I wasn't going to interfere, except to make a few changes.

"Put out that cigarette. There's no smoking at school," I demanded, tweezing the butt from between his fingers and handing it to Gordon for disposal.

"Crap, lady, chill out why doncha?"

"Watch your mouth, especially around the kids!" I warned, coming just short of also slapping his face.

The recruit looked like he was about to use a word that I particularly disdained. A word that had almost gotten in the way of my happy relationship with Alex. That's right, the "b" word. The bomb. I stopped him short by poking a finger in his face.

"Don't you dare," I warned.

He didn't dare.

Deciding to try and do something about the smell, I began searching the cupboards in the room for anything that might cover his scent. All I found was a bottle of Lysol which I decided was perfect. Holding my finger over the spout I began sprinkling the recruit with Lysol until the bottle was empty. He smelled worse.

"Hey lady, do you mind?" the recruit finally objected.

"Yes," was all I could think to say.

I bent down to pick up Officer Bill's head. This was a much lighter and leaner head than was used in the good old days. In fact, it was smaller because of the very door it now held open. This door was exactly one foot wider than the ears on the head, giving clearance of six inches on either side of the head to any poor shmuck having to negotiate this doorway wearing it. And the need to wear the head through this door occurred at least once a year. With Gordon's assistance I hoisted the recruit to attention and

attached the head to his body. Gordon held the door open while I guided Officer Bill outside.

"Hey, everybody, it's Officer Bill." I called to the excited children who were waiting, since I knew Gordon wouldn't make the effort.

"Hi, kids," Gordon said lamely as he came trotting up from behind to join us in front of the second and third graders. "Why doesn't everyone take a knee," he suggested since it had been an unseasonably dry day.

The children looked confused by Gordon's suggestion before one after the other of them sat down in the wet grass hard. True, it wasn't currently raining, but this was the Pacific Northwest which meant that it had been raining within the last few hours. The children squished their butts down good in that soggy grass until their teachers spotted them. Amongst utterances of *up, up, up* the children were ushered back to their feet. Mud and grass was wiped off but the damp pants and skirts remained to be tolerated.

Looking somewhat abashed at the result of his suggestion to *take a knee*, Officer Gordon nonetheless began his spiel.

"Hi, kids, I'm Officer Gordon and this is Officer Bill. We're here today to talk with you about safety. Does everyone know what safety means?"

A young boy in the front row began jumping up and down and waving his hand enthusiastically. Officer Bill, apparently feeling confident enough to field the boy's response on his own, stepped forward to address the lad.

"What's your name, little boy," Officer Bill asked as I watched cautiously.

"Timmy," the boy replied timidly.

"And what is safety, Timmy?"

"When you go like this," Timmy replied, taking a step toward Officer Bill and thrusting his tiny fist into the officer's groin.

"Son of a…." I heard Officer Bill hiss under his breath as he bit back the last word.

Tiny or not, the boy's fist struck home and elicited an immediate response. Officer Bill staggered back holding the lower part of his uniform with his gigantic malformed hands. I stepped in to guide Timmy back amongst his classmates who congratulated

him on the wicked attack until his teacher started to scold him. Timmy couldn't help but smile even while he was being scolded. Officer Bill eventually straightened up and resumed his place before the children. I couldn't see but could feel him scowling at Timmy the whole time.

"I'm afraid that's not safety, little boy," Gordon corrected.

"Yeah, that's not safety, Timmy," Officer Bill agreed.

"In fact, that's closer to assault. Does anyone know what assault is?"

This time all the children began jumping up and down while waving their hands. Gordon was stupid enough to ask the question.

"What's assault, children?"

I threw myself in front of the rushing children but couldn't stop them all. Officer Bill lowered both hands to protect himself but the pounding he received from the children eventually produced a few lucky blows. Even hopping up and down in circles to present a moving target didn't help all that much. Officer Bill went down holding his damaged goods while Gordon, the teachers, and I got the children under control and began guiding them back to their places.

It took both Gordon and me to get Officer Bill back to his feet and calm him down. The recruit wanted to leave. Reminding him that he had yet to be paid, Gordon convinced him to stay. We resumed our positions in front of the children and Gordon began talking of safety in earnest. He'd only made it a minute into his lecture when I noticed the children murmuring amongst themselves while pointing and laughing. Timmy's hand shot into the air and started to wave. Gordon ignored the boy. I began to smell smoke. Looking to Officer Bill I saw smoke pouring from his left eye socket which served as one of the two screens for the wearer to see through.

"Look! Officer Bill's head is on fire," Timmy eventually screamed without first being recognized by a grownup.

I recognized the smoke as that of a cigarette rather than the smolder of burning brains even though I'd had limited experience with the latter. I pulled a squeeze bottle of water from my hip where it was suspended from my all-purpose utility belt—worn in

the guise of a fanny pack. I took aim and sent a steady stream of water into the left eye of Officer Bill.

"Oh, shit," the recruit exclaimed and that was all I was willing to take.

I terminated the stream of water as soon as it appeared I had extinguished the flames inside the massive mascot head. Then I grabbed Officer Bill and pulled him back to the administrative building and through the door into the back room.

I won't sully these pages with the words that were exchanged in that back room. Suffice it to say that the recruit left, never to be employed by the HFPD again, and the role of Officer Bill reverted to where I suppose it always belonged. The stench of smoke and body odor was strong as I lifted the head over mine. When Officer Bill finally reemerged from that back room he was in fine fettle and ready for action.

"Boston, it's no use. The kids have all gone back to class," Gordon explained.

But I would have none of it. I led Gordon to the second grade classroom—I remembered its location from when I'd attended the school. Letting myself quietly into the back of the second graders' classroom, I cringed when I saw the children turn, recognize me, and begin to look fearful. I instantly dropped to my knee and began wringing my fists beside my fake eyes.

"What's wrong, Officer Bill?" Timmy wanted to know.

"It looks like Officer Bill is sad," Gordon explained.

"Why?"

I stood and leaned into Gordon to whisper my reply through an eye socket then took a knee again.

"Officer Bill says that he's sad because he scared everyone and now no one likes him anymore," Gordon forwarded.

"But I like Officer Bill," Timmy replied.

In response to his words I stopped wringing tears from my eyes and threw my arms open wide for a hug. Timmy smiled and began running toward me.

"Come on, everyone, let's make Officer Bill happy again," Timmy called to his classmates.

It turns out that one of the great experiences in life is sharing in a group hug with a class full of seven-year-olds. Seriously, it

was very nice. And I felt that the love the children were extending my way was genuine and from the heart. Later I went to the third graders' room to apologize. They didn't hug me but accepted my apology. I guess the hugging impulse ends at age eight.

After changing out of my costume, I headed back to the worksite where I'd left Blue under the supervision of Mr. Adams.

"How did your morning with the kids go?" Mr. Adams asked.

"Great. I always learn something new from them."

"What did you learn today?"

"Compassion."

We considered the word for a spell, nodding in the affirmative to one another. Eventually I came to a conclusion I could no longer avoid.

"You know, Mr. Adams, I feel too good to work today. I'm on schedule with all my tasks. I think I'm going to take the day off."

"What will you do with your free time?"

"I may do some shopping or maybe I'll do nothing."

"I hear you there." Mr. Adams replied. "If you're looking to go offsite on a project, I need to have someone run these papers out to Pricilla's house. She phoned in to announce that she was canceling today's meeting but wanted to see these progress reports anyway."

I tried to think up some clever excuse for why I couldn't perform this simple task but came up blank. I certainly was in no rush to see Pricilla Copeland any time soon. Still, supposing that all I would have to do is hand over the material and leave, I accepted the packet of papers and headed out the door to my car.

Of course, Pricilla lived in the nicest community in town, a group of custom built homes known collectively as the Forest Meadows Estates. I found her home without difficulty and was actually surprised to discover that the front lawn was overgrown and the foliage untended. I supposed that Pricilla would have to have a stern word with her gardeners as I gathered the papers off the passenger seat and walked to the front door of her home. I was about to ring the doorbell when I heard a terrible screaming coming from inside the house. I tried the door and found it to be unlocked, so I let myself in.

The screaming was coming from the living room to my right where I found Pricilla trying desperately to keep an old man from getting up from his chair. The elderly man who was being restrained was hollering bloody murder.

"Help me!" the man screamed. "They're trying to eat me. They want to serve my bones for dinner."

Recognizing the man's complaint made no sense, I rushed to the chair to assist Pricilla in getting him to remain in his seat. After we succeeded in seating the man he calmed as Pricilla cooed soothing words in his ear and brushed his hair from his face with her hand.

"What are you doing here?" Pricilla snapped when she finally turned to address me. "Who let you in?"

"The door was unlocked," I explained. "I brought by some papers for you. I heard the screaming coming from inside. Who is this man?"

"He's my husband, Albert Copeland," Pricilla replied.

Pricilla's words shocked me to the core. As we stood in toe-to-toe confrontation, a man came running down from upstairs to join us in the living room.

"I'm sorry I'm late, I was using the facilities upstairs," the man explained.

I recognized the man as the one who had accompanied Pricilla to the restoration site the other day. He was the man I'd mistaken for Pricilla's husband.

"Chloe Boston, I'd like you to meet my brother-in-law, Harold Copeland. He's here to visit and help out with Albert for a few weeks."

"Hello, Harold," I said, extending my hand.

"Chloe," the man replied, returning my handshake.

During this entire exchange, the man in the chair, Albert, Pricilla's husband, sat rocking back and forth while mumbling to himself. He paid little attention to me or anyone else in the room. It was obvious that he was engaged in a battle with his own inner demons. I had dealt with a neighbor who had dementia in the past, but the symptoms Albert was exhibiting proved that his condition was far worse.

"Why don't you go talk with your friend in the kitchen," Harold suggested. "I'll stay here with Albert while you're gone."

Pricilla led the way to the kitchen where she offered me a chair at the kitchenette table. I took a seat while Pricilla remained standing and looking somewhat shaken.

"Can I offer you some coffee?" Pricilla asked.

"Actually, I'd love some, but only if you were going to make some for yourself."

"I'd love a cup too."

While Pricilla went about brewing a fresh pot of coffee, I sat and considered what I should and shouldn't say. Ultimately, my curiosity got the better of me and I started asking questions regarding the surprising situation I'd stumbled upon.

"What's wrong with your husband?" I asked.

"He's suffering from the advanced stages of Alzheimer's disease," Pricilla responded bluntly.

"How long has he been like this?"

"He's been really bad for several months now. Before that he wasn't quite so bad. In the beginning you could barely tell anything was wrong with him."

"Shouldn't he be in a home?" I blurted before I could stop myself.

"Yes, he should be," Pricilla agreed, stopping to address me. "And he would be if we could afford it. Unfortunately, we lost our health coverage, which didn't include coverage for an extended illness anyway. So, I'm left to take care of him myself. That and pay the bills."

"Oh, but that's terrible."

"We each do what we must to get by. Visiting nurses stop by twice a week, but other than that I'm on my own. Thank goodness for Harold. He visits frequently."

At this point in our conversation, Pricilla began to cry. I stood and guided her to the table.

"Why don't you take a seat while I finish the coffee," I suggested.

The coffee was soon done brewing and I brought two steaming mugs to the table. By that time the worst of the tears were

over, but Pricilla still looked physically drained. I sat beside her and placed a hand on hers.

"Why don't you tell me about it," I said.

So she did, every horrible detail. She told me of how slowly and inexorably her life with the man she loved had become a living hell. I don't recall all the details, but then the details didn't really matter. What mattered most, what was at the center of her story, was a broken heart, torn slowly to pieces by having to watch the only man she ever loved slowly disappear before her very eyes. I said little during the bulk of our conversation. Part of the way through it I could stand it no longer and began crying myself. Harold left us alone to talk as I continued to serve coffee. We moved on to talk of other, happier times. Pricilla started to perk up as she told me about how she had met her husband and the travels they enjoyed together. I was proud of the fact that on one or two occasions I managed to make Pricilla laugh.

By the end of our conversation it was beginning to get dark and I had grown positive of two things. The first was that I'd made a new friend, and a good friend at that. The second was that I was somehow going to help my new friend out with her predicament.

"How can I help, with Albert I mean?" I finally asked.

"That's sweet of you, Chloe, but you don't have to do that."

"But I want to," I insisted.

"Just having you visit again would be a great start," she suggested hopefully.

"Done."

We hugged, Pricilla and I, before I finally left. I made arrangements to stop by again the next day. Pricilla told me that Tara Lee had called to tell her that she'd heard several interesting stories regarding practices and mishaps around the worksite. She concluded by adding that she'd love to hear some of my own stories. I assured her that I had no stories of interest and left determined that I must contact Tara Lee before she had a chance to spill the beans.

That night I was quiet while I prepared dinner and even while Alex and I ate together. Alex tried small talk but I remained preoccupied.

"What's wrong?" Alex asked.

"Nothing," I replied.

Later, in bed, I laid my head on Alex's shoulder and held him tight. A tear came to my eye and rolled down my cheek onto his chest.

"Come on, what's wrong?" Alex asked again, shaking me this time.

"Nothing. I'm just glad that I have you with me now and hope that we'll always be together," I explained.

Chapter 5

Every day brings new challenges. The current one was the attic. I poked my head up barely over the ledge of the trapdoor and shined my flashlight into the dense gloom beyond. I'd been assigned to attic detail to search out leaks in the roof even after I'd explained emphatically that I had an aversion to spiders. Instead of respecting my phobia I had it explained back to me that I was short and small and could move around and get into tiny corners far better than any of my peers. I understood what the hulking man with the bruises on his head and arms was saying but I was still hesitant to take on the task. Besides, there seemed to be some unspoken reason that he was particularly hesitant to enter the attic. Then I recognized the thrill of discovery that would accompany exploring a one-hundred-year-old attic for roof leaks. I accepted the assignment then but now I was hesitant to enter my new work environment.

I got the feeling I was entering a vast space. This made sense considering the house below was massive. It was almost like being outside on a cool summer night except there was a musty smell and I couldn't hear any animals. In fact, I couldn't hear anything. I was trying to force myself to enter this dank domain when I felt someone slap my boot from below.

"Hurry up, Boston. We don't have all day."

It was Pete, the roofing lead, who was taking me on my first tour of the attic—at least a tour of the areas of the attic we could reach, Pete liked to laugh. This was a grim reminder that it was I who was now responsible for extending the explored limits of the attic.

I pulled myself through the hole and into the immense space and then held the trapdoor open for Pete. At the same time I flashed my light around the darkness looking for any monsters that were about to grab me. I found no monsters but did spot lots of old furniture and boxes. I couldn't wait to begin my investigation. Eventually Pete was standing beside me. I was fully prepared to hold hands against the darkness but settled for the rosier aspect of the attic having two flashlights to pierce the darkness.

"I wanted you to see it like this, like it actually is, the first time," Pete explained.

Under the glow from my flashlight he flipped a switch and the explored portion of the attic exploded into light.

"Wow!" I exclaimed.

The light was actually rather blinding having come from total darkness. I had to shade my eyes for a moment and allow my eyes to slowly adjust. The space was immense, but to hear the others on attic detail talk there were still areas that had yet to be explored. In fact, no more than seventy percent of the attic had been covered, leaving some large areas cut off and uncounted.

"There's one area in particular we'd like you to check out," Pete explained. "It's a space that can only be accessed by a narrow crawlspace. We'd like to know what's beyond that crawlspace before we begin demolition."

"Demolition?" I questioned.

"We have to gain access to all areas of the attic, that's city ordinance. So, we're getting into that area. What you find will determine how gently we do it."

"Shouldn't it always be done gently?"

"And it will be, Boston. Just get your skinny butt in there and tell me what you see," Pete scolded.

I was about to object before I realized that Pete probably meant his rude comment to be a compliment. I chose to shut up and take one on the chin for the boys. Besides, Pete's own ass was comically large. He was a retired plumber. I shivered when I thought of the plumber's crack he must be able to present. This thought dawned on me much too often when in Pete's presence.

I turned from Pete to find myself looking down a narrow passage between some fallen boards. The first portion of my trek would involve climbing. Light from a nearby overhead, the last such light in a chain that represented the outer barrier of known space, shone part of the way down the passage I was to traverse. It was obvious that the bulk of the lighting would be coming from my flashlight. Then Pete surprised me again with another flick of the switch. This time hanging garage lights hung from the rafters lit most of my way into an area of debris.

"You're sending me into that?" I quailed.

"Wear gloves. Push things aside. Tell me if there's anything valuable amid the debris."

"Right," I replied.

You'd have thought I'd be terrified to enter the web-like funnel. After all the distant debris was mostly in darkness, just the kind of place in which spiders like to hide. But actually, now that I had a ready retreat, I had no issue with advancing. True, I would have been more comfortable wearing something akin to a bee keeper's outfit. But I was fine as I usually am in the worst situations. I'm funny that way.

I wasted no time as I began climbing through the rafters toward the debris. It was rumored that this portion of the house contained no nails. It was instead held together by wooden dowels milled so precisely they needed no glue to hold fast. I slipped lithely through the rafters which I'm sure were difficult for my bulkier male counterparts to navigate without a few bruises and scrapes. I didn't pay the price for my diminutive size until I reached the debris and didn't have the body mass to easily shift things. I found a large mirror leaning face down against a beautiful set of drawers, each swathed in dusty stiff tarpaulins. I found some rugs that I assumed were beautiful rolled up and laid aside to rot. I hoped that Pricilla had someone assigned to registering and finding a place for each of the relics I uncovered. I would also have to warn Pete to keep the demolition light when coming through the antique graveyard—this stuff looked valuable.

I became lost both in time and space digging through the maze of old furniture, boxes, and chests. I made a mental note of each piece I encountered for my report. Meanwhile I continued to climb through gaps in broken rafters, furniture, and boxes with my shoes alighting on the attic floor only in those rare instances where there was a gap in the debris.

I was in one such gap when I found a small door.

The door stood about four feet high and was narrow. It felt odd to look down upon a common structure that had traditionally forced me to look up. I tried the knob and found the door to be unlocked. I pushed it open, shined my light all around, and found a light switch on the wall. At some point the attic had been electrified and I was grateful.

Flipping the switch, the room came alive with light. Through the door was a miniature sitting room filled with miniature furniture and light fixtures on tables. The place was both adorable and a little creepy at the same time. It was an adorable replica of a real home reduced to child size. It was a little creepy because there were no children playing in it. The room felt lifeless and cold without children.

It felt a little awkward to have to duck my head to enter the room. I'd never had to do that before. Traveling in a crouch, I switched my flashlight off and stowed it in my baggy work pants pocket then dropped to my hands and knees to examine a nearby curio cabinet. Within the cabinet were delicate cups and saucers paired with ornate tea sets. Of course, everything was executed in miniature, as was the room, which made the size of the various services appropriate to their surroundings. Everything in the room was so obviously charming and yet a little scary in that the room could so easily corrupt one's perspective.

"Boston? Are you okay back there?" Pete called.

"I'm fine," I yelled back at the top of my lungs. "I think I've found something."

"What is it?"

"I'll tell you when I get back."

I continued my exploration of the room. I was naturally drawn to a sitting chair positioned beneath a corner lamp that resided beside an end table. The table was coated in a thin layer of dust and cobwebs. Amidst this sign of long disuse the scene appeared fresh, as if someone had just laid their glasses and a book aside on the table. In this case there was no book, but there was an unusual device that looked like an ancient slide projector.

What had I found?

I reached out a hand and touched the projector. It contained extra cogs and wheels, the purpose of which I did not understand. Wound on the table beside the device was a power cord. It looked as if the cord had been partially eaten through by rodents. That would have to be fixed before the device could ever be put to use again, I thought to myself as I cleared a finger's width of dust from the top of the unit. Regardless of it being plugged in or not I was surprised when I felt a shock run up my arm from the device. The

jolt made my eyelids shutter and my teeth clench. I pulled my hand away quickly and looked to insure that the sensation had caused no mark or damage though my arm still tingled from its passing.

I shivered in the cool air of the attic room.

I was prepared to examine the device more closely when I was startled by a movement I caught out of the corner of my eye. I turned my head and barely caught sight of what I thought was a young girl dressed in white leaving the room. Startled, I resumed my crouch and rushed for the tiny door to the diminutive room. Flashing my light outside in the attic I saw nothing amongst the detritus. I also heard nothing to confirm what I thought I'd seen.

I did hear another call from Pete.

"I'll be right there," I assured him.

Reaching back a hand I flipped off the light switch and closed the door to the room. Then I began my arduous journey back through the jungle of rafters to stand by Pete's side. Along the way I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being watched. I stood for a moment beside Pete slapping the worst of the dust from my clothing before addressing him.

"So, what did you find?"

"Lots of valuable furniture and a tiny room."

"Dammit," Pete exclaimed. "I was afraid of that." After a pause he continued. "Did you say you found a room?"

"It's the size of a play house. I think it might have been used by Lizzie Stubbs. It's full of antiques, china and stuff. And inside the room I found an interesting device. It looks like a projector."

"That's just great, Boston," Pete said, running his hand through his hair in frustration.

I could see that Pete was annoyed at the added work so I quelled my enthusiasm regarding my finds. Pete looked through the forest of rafters for a time obviously deeply immersed in his decision regarding his course of action. I couldn't help but feel the darkness all around pressing in on us. My vision began to blur and my head to pound.

"Do you mind if we leave now?" I asked, beginning to feel a little dizzy.

"Sure, I suppose we're done here," Pete replied nonchalantly.

Pete led the way down the center of the attic to the trapdoor. I began to follow but didn't make it very far. At first I noticed a shape at the edge of the darkness out of the corner of my eye. But before I could look that way I was distracted by a flurry of white on the opposite side. More images followed, always outside the periphery of my vision. Though I soon realized that I would never succeed in getting a good look at any of the shapes that distracted me I continued to turn in the hope of one short glimpse which would at least validate what I thought I was seeing.

"Boston, are you alright?" I heard Pete ask.

"I have returned." I heard the darkness whisper.

My vision became a tunnel of swirling black. I could see Pete's face at the end of the tunnel. I remember reaching out my hand before losing consciousness. I had no idea whether Pete succeeded in lessening the impact from my fall.

* * *

I woke lying on my back on a set of two-by-fours laid between a pair of sawhorses. Several men I recognized were looking down at me with concerned expressions on their faces. The sky was blue with only an occasional cloud showing beyond the faces.

"Hey look, she's awake."

"Back up and let her catch her breath." I heard Mr. Adams say.

I turned my sore eyes in the direction of his voice and saw Pete standing beside him and looking as if he was having an anxiety attack.

"Are you alright?" Pete asked meekly.

"Give her some time to get reoriented." Mr. Adams suggested.

"I'm okay," I said tentatively, trying to ease Pete's frazzled nerves. "I think."

I tried sitting up and was ultimately assisted slowly and in stages to my feet. I was none too steady so I appreciated the hands of Mr. Adams and Pete holding onto my arms. After a while spent getting my breath back I was finally able to stand upright without

assistance. Fortunately, the nauseous feeling I had woken with was beginning to subside.

"Chloe, what happened?" Pete asked.

"I don't know." I replied. "One moment everything was fine and the next I was on the floor."

"Come with me, young lady," Mr. Adams said. "I'm going to drive you to the hospital right this minute."

"That won't be necessary," I replied glibly.

"You're going to the hospital to get checked out anyway," Mr. Adams insisted.

Guiding me by the arm, Mr. Adams and a ring of concerned men led me to Mr. Adams' truck where I was hoisted into the passenger seat. Mr. Adams didn't talk during the drive. I was concerned by things I was remembering about what I'd seen and heard. My thoughts galvanized on the one thing I could do right now to help myself.

"Mr. Adams, would you mind pulling to the curb?" I asked.

"Why? Are you going to be sick?"

"Yes, I'm going to be sick."

Truth be told, I was feeling in fine fettle. I seized upon the getting sick ploy to get my way without a lengthy argument. Once the truck stopped I was out the door and headed across the sidewalk to the front steps of the Hope Falls Public Library, there to read for myself the final chapter in the story of Lizzie Stubbs. I heard the other truck door open behind me as I strode purposely forward.

"Chloe, where are you going?"

"To the reference section."

I asked one of the librarians at the front counter for the article reserved by Gary Perkins. She was able to provide a copy of an old magazine containing a much read article outlining an incredible new device. The Magnetotron. I sat at a table and opened the magazine to the article. I sensed rather than saw Mr. Adams take the seat across the table from me.

"Chloe, what are we doing here?" Mr. Adams chided. "You should be in the hospital."

"Something happened to me back at the house, something that I think is explained in this article."

"What?"

I had to think about his question for a moment, after all the question covered a lot of territory. I decided to begin at the beginning.

"It has to do with the final story of Lizzie Stubbs."

"You mean the night of the séance?"

"You know the stories about Lizzie?"

"Everybody knows those stories." Mr. Adams sighed. "Well, I suppose that if it has to do with Lizzie Stubbs and that particular night then whatever you saw back at the mansion can't be any good."

"No, it wasn't."

We exchanged knowing eye contact.

"Go ahead and read." he told me as he pushed himself back to get more comfortable in his chair.

I lowered my eyes to the article and started to read amid the flourishes of a flamboyant advertisement.

As one should already know, the invention of electricity by Thomas Alva Edison in 1879 resulted in applications well beyond the light bulb. In fact, the most exciting applications have been in the realm of medicine in recent years providing breakthroughs in healing and even relief to those suffering from mental illness. Closely related to this research is the recently discovered relationship between a force known as the magnetic field and paranormal activity.

Succinctly put, electricity attracts ghosts. Once attracted, a reshuffling of the magnetic field surrounding a ghost can cause that ghost to disappear forever and ever.

Enter the Magnetotron.

The Magnetotron's two phases of operation work in conjunction to first attract and then dispel ghosts. Have a problem with apparitions, the Magnetotron is the answer.

Case in point.

Our company was recently contacted by a Mr. Maynard Stubbs of Hope Falls, Washington, I assure you a man of means and education. Mr. Stubbs complained of an apparition that had been plaguing his daughter Elizabeth, an apparition that he

wanted banished once and for all. Mr. Stubbs was convinced to allow us a single application of the Magnetotron during a gathering of his family, the result being no more ghost.

Good Lord. I thought, old man Stubbs had used the device in the attic to destroy Elizabeth's protector. That was no séance the family had that night, it was a trap. And I'd found the weapon used to carry out the sinister deed.

"This isn't the end," I commented to Mr. Adams. "This article doesn't tell what ultimately happened. What happened to Elizabeth after her protector was dispelled?"

"She died, Chloe. Now come on."

"She what?" I gasped. "Tell me more. When did she die and how?"

Mr. Adams looked to me with sadness in his expression. He appeared to be gauging whether I was in any shape to hear what he had to say.

"I'm sorry, Chloe, but Lizzie supposedly committed suicide later the night of the séance."

"And now she's back," I murmured to myself.

"How's that?"

"Nothing, let's go," I suggested.

We didn't speak the whole way to the hospital. Fortunately, someone had called Alex from the restoration site so he was waiting to meet me in the emergency room. Mr. Adams explained as best he could what had happened to me and then left me in Alex's capable hands so that he could head back to the worksite. We sat side by side and I laid my head on Alex's shoulder and rested my eyes.

"Do you want to tell me what's going on?" Alex asked.

By the expression on his face I wasn't sure he really wanted to know but I couldn't keep it in any longer.

"I may have accidentally awakened a ghost who's now following me," I explained as I buried my head deeper into his shoulder and started to cry.

"Shit," Alex exclaimed earnestly.

The doctor who saw me was very kind and I'm sure he was honestly trying to help. His examination could find no cause for

concern but also no explanation for why I'd passed out. It was probably just hot in the attic, we finally agreed.

All the time that the doctor prodded and poked at me I had a hard time ignoring the sense that Lizzie Stubbs was sitting right there beside me in the examining room, wanting me to do something.

Chapter 6

I was no more than a minute away from home on my way to the restoration site when I saw a familiar figure pushing a shopping cart crammed full of refuse down the sidewalk toward Main. It was none other than Dumpster Dave and just the sight of him made me feel guilty. I decided to stop and apologize for our last encounter. I pulled my car to the curb in front of him and got out.

"Hello, Dave," I said.

Dave jumped in surprise. When he recognized me, he turned his cart and began pushing it fast in the opposite direction.

"Wait," I called, chasing after him.

A wobbly wheel on his shopping cart slowed him down so I was easily able to catch up with the man. He stopped pushing his cart and turned to face me when he recognized that he wasn't going to get away.

"Look, lady, like I told you the last time, I'm not hungry," Dave insisted.

"Yes, I know that now. I just wanted to apologize for the last time we met. I'm afraid that I was all wound up and not thinking clearly."

"Apology accepted," Dave replied. "Now, go away before you get the urge to stuff food down my throat."

"I wouldn't do that," I said, recognizing the Market logo on the front of the cart. "You realize that it's illegal to take a grocery cart off the store's premises, don't you?"

"You caught me, officer," Dave relented. "I'm homeless and don't have a pot to piss in and now you want to take away my only means of transportation."

"I'm just saying," I clarified.

"Go away," Dave said before pushing his cart away.

I stood shuffling my feet self-consciously trying to think of something to say.

"Why won't you let me help you?" I asked.

I wasn't expecting a reply but instead got an earful.

"Because, the only reason you want to help me is to feel good about yourself. You don't know me. You don't give a damn about me. All you want to do is soothe your soul by helping the homeless

man. Well, if you really want to help, why don't you find me a home? And a job, and some clean clothes to go with it? Do you really think I want to live on the streets accepting handouts from spoiled rich snots like yourself?"

"I am not a snot," I objected lamely.

"Go away," he emphasized.

"What about if I find you a home?" I asked.

"What about it?"

"Would we be even then?"

Old Dave cackled at the suggestion that I was actually interested in bargaining for his forgiveness. He stopped laughing when he saw me waiting.

"You're serious, aren't you?" he asked in amusement.

"What do you need to get back on your feet?" I challenged.

"Well, first there's a roof over my head. Do you think you can manage that for the night?"

"You can stay with me," I insisted before I could check myself.

Dave smiled as he considered me. Maybe he was waiting to hear me tell him it was all a joke, that I was kidding about helping him. I continued to display my earnest face until Dave's own face took on a serious tone.

"You're serious, aren't you?" he said again in dismay.

"I'll pick you up here at five o'clock sharp. I'll bring clean clothes and expect you to shower and dress before dinner. So, what's your size anyway?"

"You're asking me? Sorry, lady, but I've lost a lot of weight since the last time I checked."

"I'll guess at your size when I buy your clothes for tonight and tomorrow we'll go shopping. Now, about cleaning up for dinner?"

"Better include a razor with those new duds," Dave snickered.

"And we'll also get your hair done tomorrow," I suggested as I turned to walk away.

"Lady," Dave interrupted.

"Yes?"

"If you're just jerking me around, I'd rather you let me down now."

"This afternoon. Five sharp." I fired back at him.

And with that I was away, never looking back, never second guessing my decision, and never feeling so uncertain about anything else before in my life. When I made it back to the car I had to sit in the driver's seat and take several deep breaths before I could manage to start the car. I drove slowly the rest of the way to the mansion, paying close attention to my driving. Blue whined and rested her muzzle on the back of my seat. Everywhere I drove I looked from side to side for the ghostly apparitions that had haunted me the last time I was in the Stubbs home.

I was in a good mood when I arrived at the worksite. Perhaps that was part of the reason I flew off the handle when I saw Mr. Peterson sitting on the front porch in the antique Morris chair he seemed to now favor, talking with a large throng of workmen.

"Oh Lord."

I actually saw his lips form the words through a parting wave in his audience as I increased the length and pace of my stride. Having slept poorly the night before I wasn't at my best, but that's no excuse for the extra ferocity I put behind my words.

"Mr. Peterson, may I have a word?"

"Seems you already have," he responded spunkily.

Several of the men surrounding us chuckled. I felt my hackles rise as my discomfort meter was ratcheted up a few degrees.

"I'd like to speak with you in private," I continued.

"I can't think of a thing you could have to say to me that these gentlemen shouldn't also hear."

A few degrees more and I was bordering on rage. You'd better disengage, I told myself, but something pushed me forward instead of pulling me back. Possibly it was my manhood, something I'd only recently begun to understand after working with these men over the last couple of weeks. Yes, even a woman can have her manhood bruised. I got enough of that at work. Here at the worksite I worked hard to acquire the respect of my peers and didn't take any threat to what respect I'd gained kindly. On the worksite respect came primarily from manhood and I could recognize when I was having my manhood challenged.

"Get up out of the chair, Mr. Peterson," I insisted.

"Make me."

"I can have you arrested if you refuse to get out of that chair."

Mumbled discussions broke out amongst the men surrounding us.

"Do we really need to have this discussion right now?" Mr. Peterson said, standing confidently.

"Honestly. Teaching children to gamble. How can you live with yourself, let alone show your face around here again?"

"You didn't let me explain," Mr. Peterson tried to interrupt.

"Nor am I likely to let you until I've had my say. Mr. Peterson, you are a shiftless layabout," I informed him.

"Well now...." he started to respond.

"You sleep when you should be working and tell tall tales to garner the admiration of the younger workmen."

This statement prompted groans from the very young workmen I was talking about. I blushed a deep red but plunged on ahead.

"And you fake injuries to get out of work," I added.

Just then I noticed that Mr. Peterson was looking pale and reaching back for the chair. The hand that didn't clasp the arm of the chair for stability clutched at his chest. Mr. Peterson sat down hard and blew all the air out of his lungs.

"Don't worry, he's just faking it," I assured his concerned audience.

"I don't think he's faking it," Pete commented.

One look at Mr. Peterson's labored breathing and I could see that he was right.

"Mr. Peterson, are you alright?"

Stupid question of the year. It was quite obvious the man was having a heart attack. I dug through my fanny pack after my cell phone and upon finding it called emergency services for an ambulance. I handed the phone to Pete who stood beside me and stepped closer to Mr. Peterson to see what I could do.

"Mr. Peterson, is there anything I can do?" I asked, kneeling beside him.

"Pills. In my pocket."

I retrieved the little pill bottle from his pocket and placed one of the tiny pills beneath his tongue. Then we waited, but I'm not very good at waiting.

"Isn't there something else I can do?" I blurted.

"Yes. Go away," he managed to reply emphatically.

The ambulance showed up quickly. The paramedics loaded Mr. Peterson gingerly onto a gurney and carried him down the steps of the mansion to the waiting vehicle. Almost immediately they put Mr. Peterson on oxygen and started an IV. Mr. Adams climbed into the back of the ambulance as the person responsible for looking after Mr. Peterson. I took it hard that it wasn't me in the back of that ambulance, but given the situation I suppose I should have felt lucky to not be in the back of a police car under arrest for attempted manslaughter. I rounded up Blue and headed for my own car determined to give chase.

At the hospital I met Mr. Adams in the waiting room of the emergency treatment center I'd just been to the previous day. I took a seat next to Mr. Adams who looked like he'd prefer to be left alone.

"Is there any word on how Mr. Peterson is doing?" I asked.

"None. They've taken him into emergency suspecting a minor heart attack."

"Oh, dear. What have I done," I moaned.

"You know, Steve Hurley stopped by the worksite to apologize to Mr. Peterson earlier today. He said that his oldest son, Keith, was caught pitching pennies at school. Apparently he's quite good at it and has been taking everyone's lunch money. Keith admitted to his father that it was him who talked Mr. Peterson into pitching pennies that day."

I couldn't speak but continued to moan as my face slipped into my hands.

I browsed every magazine in that waiting room that afternoon, including a six-month-old copy of Road & Track Magazine in which they test drove the latest generation luxury SUVs. Eventually I fell asleep in a corner chair leaned up against my jacket which I rolled up and placed against the wall. Periodically either Mr. Adams or I would ask one of the nurses for an update on Mr. Peterson's status. All they would ever say was that he was doing fine and that they were still running tests. It became dark and I called Alex to let him know where I was. I warned him that I might be late for dinner.

And so I spent my afternoon and early evening sitting at the Hope Falls Hospital, having completely forgotten about my scheduled appointment that afternoon with Dumpster Dave.

Chapter 7

It wasn't until late the next morning that I finally found Dave pushing his shopping cart down Elm toward Main. I'd made it home around midnight and instantly fell into bed. I only remembered having missed Dave the day before when my eyes shot open this morning. I drove for almost an hour before spotting him. I pulled slowly to the side of the road and rolled down my window but didn't stop moving.

"Good morning, Dave."

No response wasn't a good sign.

"I'm sorry I missed you yesterday afternoon."

"When you tell someone that you're going to be someplace at five o'clock sharp, that means you'll be there at five o'clock sharp," Dave growled.

We continued to move down Elm. I kept one eye out for parked cars and the other on Dave. He wasn't slowing down.

"Dave, I'm sorry. I had an emergency arise yesterday afternoon."

"That's no excuse for not showing up on time."

"It isn't? Are you sure?"

Again I received no response.

"I'm here now."

"You're not on time."

"And I said I'm sorry, which I truly am."

Dave stopped pushing the cart and I brought my car to a halt. He turned to face me. Blue looked out the slobber-stained back window and whined for reconciliation.

"You promise to keep your word in the future?"

"I do."

"So, what's the plan?" Dave asked.

"Get in the car. We'll go shop for some clothes. I'll take you to my place for a shave and a shower. Later we can get your hair done. Some time I'd like to stop by the hospital and see how my friend is doing."

"So you weren't fibbing about yesterday's emergency," he replied.

"You wouldn't believe the day I had."

"Try me."

So I told him, the whole story from the beginning. How Mr. Peterson had irritated me at the worksite and how I'd finally snapped. How I thought he was teaching children to gamble and it turned out to be the other way around. How I'd nearly killed a sweet doddering old man.

"Wow, you can really turn mean when you get a bee in your bonnet," Dave exclaimed.

"You don't know the half of it. So, get in."

"What, and leave my priceless possessions here on the street for some lousy bum to steal? I'm afraid you'll have to wait until I find a friend to look after my things for me while I'm gone."

"Dave, I'm sure your possessions will be fine sitting back there in the alley for a few hours," I argued.

"I suppose," he said, looking skeptically toward the alleyway.

I continued to cajole him and eventually he relented and pushed his cart a few yards into the alley, finally parking it behind a dumpster against the back wall of the watch and clock store. Dave climbed into the passenger seat of my car and instantly infused my small vehicle with his manly presence. I heard Blue whine in the backseat and envisioned her in my mind lying down to cover her snout with her paws.

"Perhaps we should drive with the windows down," I suggested, reaching to the master controls on my door to lower all the windows.

I left Blue in the car while we ran into Walmart after some clothes. I don't frequent Walmart, preferring to patronize the local stores, but sometimes you just can't beat the speed, convenience, and price of all that Chinese merchandise. Anyway, Dave chose a couple pairs of jeans and two heavy Pendleton shirts. I also bought him underwear, socks, and some light hiking boots. The final touch was a light brown leather coat that I found on sale. Dave refused to wear his new duds out of the store, preferring instead to clean up first. I found this to be a hopeful sign though I looked forward to disposing of his current clothes as soon as possible.

At home I found Alex's door shut which meant that he was working and would rather not be disturbed. Still I felt safer having him within screaming distance while sharing my home with a

homeless stranger. I guided Dave to the guest bathroom where I laid out his new cleaning products. Then I went to the living room to wait.

I was leafing through a magazine when Dave stepped into the room. His hair was still long and showed plenty of gray, but his face was clean shaven and he looked good in his new clothes. Real good. I noticed that my jaw had dropped open at the sight of him.

"I'm not sure what you want me to do with my old clothes," he said sheepishly.

"Why don't we take them straight out to the garbage," I suggested.

"One thing," he interrupted.

"What's that?"

"Do you mind if I keep my hair long? I've grown accustomed to it."

"I think it would be a sin to touch one lock on your head," I agreed.

Dave smiled at that and tightened his belt against his loose jeans falling down.

"What do you say we give your friend a visit," Dave suggested.

I had to leave Blue at home with Alex since I didn't know how long I would be away. Dave and I drove to the hospital with the windows rolled up. When we made it there we found that Mr. Peterson had been checked into a room and was anxious to see me. I brought Dave with me as I entered his room. I found him lying back in bed watching Court TV.

"Hello, Mr. Peterson," I began. "I'm real sorry I yelled at you and gave you a heart attack."

Mr. Peterson waved his hands at me dismissively.

"It wasn't a heart attack," he explained. "It was an anxiety attack is the best they can figure."

"You didn't have a heart attack then? Thank goodness."

"Problem is they won't let me out of here without an attending nurse, which isn't covered by my insurance."

At this point in our conversation, Dave cleared his throat loudly.

"Who are you?" Mr. Peterson asked.

"Mr. Peterson, I'd like you to meet Dave … I'm sorry, but I don't know your last name."

"My name is Dave Christy, formerly known as Dumpster Dave," Dave said, extending his hand.

"You're Dumpster Dave?" Mr. Peterson replied, taking his hand. "You sure clean up nice."

"It is a miracle what a shave, a shower, and some clean clothes can do," Dave said in agreement. "The thing is, I was other people in my past life."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, I was once Private First Class David Christy, medic for the 101 Airborne Division in Nam."

"Your point being?" Peterson prompted.

"I have medical training and I'm looking for work."

Mr. Peterson and I exchanged a knowing glance.

"But I can't afford to pay you," Mr. Peterson explained.

"I'm looking for nothing more than room and board," Dave explained.

"In that case, you nearly got yourself hired, Mr. Christy. Unfortunately, I have one more problem."

"What's that?"

"I'm being evicted."

"So, we're both looking for the same thing: a simple roof over our heads," Dave empathized.

"Afraid so."

I already had all the salient facts loaded into my ANALYTICO engine. All I had to do was mentally press the "Start" button to set my mind in motion. I weighted each piece of evidence as I weighed my options. I drew correlations and tested my assumptions. In the end, the answer was simple and obvious.

"Mr. Peterson, let's get you checked out of this hospital."

"To go where?"

"I have a plan," I assured him.

It took well over two hours to track down the nurses and doctors needed to sign a stack of forms required to release Mr. Peterson from the hospital. Eventually I pulled my car to the front entrance while Dave pushed Mr. Peterson to the curb in a wheelchair. Once we were all safely ensconced in my tiny vehicle I

drove to the expensive part of town, to the home of Pricilla Copeland. On the way there I filled them in on Pricilla's situation.

Pricilla answered the door on my second knock. I was pleased to hear that Pricilla was enjoying a quiet morning.

"Why, Chloe, you came." Pricilla said in delight.

"It's good to see you, Pricilla," I replied.

We hugged, like girlfriends often do, then Pricilla noticed that we were not alone.

"Oh my, who might these gentlemen be?" she asked.

"Mrs. Pricilla Copeland, I'd like to introduce you to the help." I began. "This is Mr. David Christy, a military medic, and Mr. Peterson, the best storyteller you ever will hear."

"Oh my," Pricilla said, putting a hand to her mouth in surprise. "But Chloe, I can't afford any more assistance."

"These two men are looking for room and board. Can you provide that?"

"Well, yes, I suppose I can. But what about references?"

"I can vouch for them," I replied.

"That won't be necessary." Dave suggested.

"But I can vouch for you, to the extent that I know you."

"No, he's right," Mr. Peterson continued. "You really don't know us at all. Besides, if we're the men I think we are then we should be able to explain our own situations."

Dave stepped forward to address Pricilla.

"Mrs. Copeland, my name is David Christy. I was born around the middle of the last century in the Midwest. I was an army medic during the Vietnam War. I saw a lot of bad things and had to deal with situations most doctors would shy away from. I led a life owning my own business for a time, but somehow I fell on bad times. I've been living in the streets these days. I don't drink and I don't do drugs. And I don't steal. I'd like to get a roof over my head again. I'm offering to stay with your husband so that you can be free to pursue your life. All I ask is room and board in return."

Mr. Peterson stepped forward to stand beside Dave.

"Mrs. Copeland, my name is Stanley Peterson. I'm a decent person. I'm old and am about to be homeless. You might know me from the Stubbs Mansion Restoration Project, but believe me when

I tell you that I'm a lot handier then most people know. I was married once. Her name was Mary. We had two kids, but they don't keep in touch anymore. I don't blame them, they're so busy. I can tell your husband stories all day long so he'll be happy. I need a place to stay if you can spare one."

I saw tears well up in Pricilla's eyes.

"Gentlemen," she pronounced grandly, "I would be honored to have you stay with us."

I think that both Dave and Mr. Peterson became surprised and somewhat concerned when the hugging started. And once Pricilla began I couldn't help but join in. In the end we formed a huddle and jumped up and down as we laughed together.

"Pricilla, what's going on here?"

I recognized Harold Copeland, Pricilla's brother-in-law, approaching from inside the house. I suspected it might require a great deal more time to convince Harold that it was a good idea to take on the new recruits, but Pricilla had things well in hand.

"Harold, I'd like you to meet our new houseguests. Mr. David Christy is a military medic who will be looking after Albert during the day. And this is his assistant, Mr. Stanley Peterson, storyteller extraordinaire."

"Oh my," Harold exclaimed, causing us all to laugh.

"Well, don't just stand there saying *Oh my*, get the keys to the station wagon. We have two gentlemen to move into the guest bedrooms. I do hope you won't mind sharing a bathroom?"

"Ma'am, if you only knew," Dave replied. "But first, I wonder if you wouldn't mind introducing us to our new boss."

"Why of course, Mr. Christy."

"Please, call me Dave."

"It's alright if you call me Mr. Peterson," Mr. Peterson interjected, "everyone always does anyway."

On the way home I stopped by the worksite to give everyone the good news about Mr. Peterson being out of the hospital and having found a new home and job for both him and a friend of mine. I felt like less of a pariah walking across the property with my head held high, the savior of the old man of the restoration project rather than the source of his demise.

That night I had what I could only describe as another encounter with my disgruntled spirit. I was taking the garbage out to the cans in the side yard when the air around me became icy cold. My breath was suddenly coming in steamy drafts. The bulb that lights the side yard flickered out. A breeze picked up making itself known via tiny fingers that clawed at my bare arms and neck. I wrapped my arms around myself against the cold but shivered all the same. Then I heard a familiar voice whispering in the darkness.

"I have returned."

I peered into the darkness and thought I saw the silhouette of a little girl standing beside a tree, but when I tried to focus on the figure it vanished from my sight only to barely be seen standing at the head of the drive. I felt like I was surrounded though I could see no one directly.

"Lizzie, is that you?" I found myself whispering.

When the metal garbage can lids started to rattle and bang I nearly wet myself. What is going on here? My mind balked at the obvious conclusion. Though I'd had brushes with the supernatural in the past, I'd never been so certain that I was having a supernatural experience as I was now. No, let me be more specific. I was sure I was being haunted by the ghost of Elizabeth Stubbs.

The banging stopped and I found that I had fallen to the concrete path and tried to curl into a ball to protect myself from attack and from the noise. The light came back on. Alex appeared to find me lying on the path shivering.

"Chloe, are you alright? What happened?" Alex asked, dropping to a knee.

I just wanted to be held by Alex. I climbed into his arms to make my needs known. We knelt on the path until I was ready to get up. The moment Alex guided me into the house I headed for the kitchen phone. There I dialed Pricilla Copeland.

"Hello, Pricilla?"

"Yes, this is Pricilla."

"This is Chloe, I need your help."

"Hello, Chloe. What with?"

"I need to hold a séance at the mansion tomorrow."

"Oh my."

It took all of fifteen minutes to explain my situation and what I planned to do about it. By the time I was done my mouth was dry and I was exhausted. Pricilla informed me that she was fully onboard. It helped that she had already heard the Lizzie Stubbs stories and I felt assured that she believed me. Before hanging up we agreed on a time to meet.

Chapter 8

When I arrived at the mansion the next morning, which was ironically to be my last day on the restoration project anyway, I found that everyone was waiting for me. All the men that I'd worked with over the past month and a half were waiting out front to witness my arrival. They crowded round on the front steps and porch of the mansion as I approached and extended their hands so they could slap me on the back as I passed. Words of encouragement were mumbled under their breaths. Most of the men tried to smile but were ultimately forced to frown and look down at the tops of their work boots when I tried to meet their gaze.

I knew that Pricilla would have needed to get in touch with Mr. Adams to arrange things. No doubt Mr. Adams had needed the assistance of others and in that way word had gotten around until everyone knew what I had planned for this morning. And to add spice to the festivities, everyone at the worksite thrived on the Lizzie Stubbs stories and no doubt felt the need to be present for what might prove to be the final chapter.

The only one of importance not present was my dog Blue. She was sensitive to my moods and I didn't see a need to have her present while confronting a malevolent spirit. I could sense that malevolent spirit waiting for me inside the house.

I felt like an object of both fear and curiosity as I passed. Mr. Adams was wearing a stern face as he waited for me at the front door.

"Are you sure you want to go through with this?" he asked solemnly.

"Yes," I returned just as solemnly.

"You know that you're not the only one."

"What do you mean?"

"Everyone has seen her. I'm damn sure I felt her once."

"And?"

"I'm just saying that it shouldn't have to be you. But good luck anyway."

Mr. Adams turned and led the way inside and up the stairs. He continued to lead the way all the way through the attic. I tried to

keep my eyes mostly closed against the swirling demons all around me. I was surprised to see that a passage had been cleared through the debris allowing ready access to the tiny door. People had been busy this morning. Pete was there to open the door for me, allowing me to enter the playroom.

"Good luck," he said as I ducked my head and passed inside.

Pricilla, Dave, and Mr. Peterson were waiting for me at a table which had been set up in the center of the room. None of them smiled or said a word as I approached. The machine, the Magnetotron, had been placed in the center of the table. The cord on the device had been replaced. It was plugged into an extension cord which ran across the floor to a corner outlet. It appeared that everything had been made ready for my arrival.

I had scheduled our meeting for eleven o'clock, needing the extra time in the morning to stop by the library and do some research. It appeared that the workmen had made themselves busy during my absence. I appreciated their labors on my behalf, or possibly as Mr. Adams had insinuated, everyone had a stake in this game. I said a silent prayer for all of us as I took my seat.

"Before arriving here this morning," I began, "I stopped by the Hope Falls Public Library to do some research on ghosts in general and specifically on séances. I realize that today we won't be conducting your standard séance, wanting to vanquish a ghost rather than talk with one, but I believe that my research uncovered some information that may prove useful anyway."

"What are we here for, Chloe?" Mr. Peterson asked.

"Protection, Mr. Peterson. While in the presence of the ghost, I hope that you and the others will protect me."

"Me? But I'm an old man."

"You're the storyteller, Mr. Peterson. A very powerful archetype and besides, we have a unique spiritual connection after what we've been through together."

"I suppose you're right there," Mr. Peterson replied, wiping a few drops of sweat from his brow. "In any case you can count on me to be here for whatever you need."

"Thank you. I hope that you don't end up regretting those words."

I regretted the words the moment they left my mouth. Then again, I couldn't help but be a little jittery. After all I could sense Lizzie all around us. Her activity was furious as she danced around the room like a drop of water tossed onto a hot frying pan. I'd been trying to ignore her increasingly frenetic excitement ever since I'd first entered the home. I considered myself lucky to have successfully navigated the attic stairs in her presence.

"Now might be a good time to mention that if anyone needs to leave this is the time to do it," I instructed.

As if on cue the floor began to rumble and jump causing the furniture in the room to dance in place. At the same time the room became bitterly cold. There was no doubt that Elizabeth Stubbs was making her presence known. By the looks of those sitting at the table I could see that the introduction was recognized by all. Though there was plenty of fear flowing round the table, I soon recognized that I'd chosen my protectors well when I saw that no one rose to leave. In fact, after the initial fear was over their determined faces became set in stone.

"Is it my imagination or are the shadows in the corners of the room moving?" Dave asked.

"It's not your imagination. I noticed the same thing the moment Chloe entered the room," Pricilla added.

"She's here already," I explained. "She entered the room with me."

I waited a moment for the frenzied activity to slow. Eventually it did but the table continued to rattle while the shadows slipped sinuously around the furniture from corner to corner. I removed a sheaf of notes from my pocket and began to speak.

"Séances are conducted in an attitude of solemnity in order to show respect for the spirit being summoned. I suggest we conduct ourselves today with the same solemnity as we assist Elizabeth Stubbs to her final destination."

"Hear, hear," Mr. Peterson replied.

"The purpose of the séance is to draw an individual who's passed from the spirit world back into our own world for the purpose of conversation. Instead, we'll be using this machine, the Magnetotron, for that purpose."

At the mere mention of the device the shadows in the corners swelled and the rattling and banging became more pronounced. I waited for the fit to pass before continuing.

"Now, if no one has any objections, we'll begin," I said, reaching to the machine.

"So, this machine is going to vanquish the ghost?" Pricilla asked.

"During the first phase, it will be used to draw the spirit into our presence." I responded, pausing in my reach.

"Seems like we've already done a fine job of that," Mr. Peterson objected.

I smiled wanly as I flipped the switch on the side of the projector to the *On* position. The machine started to hum. The tone of the humming changed over time as if the machine was coming up to speed. Then I heard the chattering of gears. The machine ultimately sounded a lot like the old 8mm movie projector my father got from his father. Because the machine was encased in a metal shroud, no doubt to hide its secret machinations, I was surprised by every change it brought about, even though I'd read about its effects at the library. First, the air in the room became bitterly cold. I could see my breath in front of my face when I blew it out. I looked to the open end of the table and saw an oily dark cloud beginning to form. The cloud twisted and roiled as if it was a beast caught in a trap.

"Crap, something's startin' to burn," Dave observed.

"Stay seated, Mr. Christy," I insisted.

The room had become dark, which contributed to the brilliance of the projected light when it first appeared. The light beams tore through the darkness but still barely penetrated the deepest pockets of oily blackness. It took several moments to realize that what little light passed through the cloud painted a rustic portrait of a family gathered for some festive occasion on the wall.

"They tricked her," I said.

"How's that?" asked Dave.

"They made her think they were having a séance to meet her spirit companion. They made her think it was to be a party."

A scream overcame the hum of the machine and then abated. The inky cloud roiled and a new image formed to replace the first. It was a picture of the machine sitting on a table in the family room downstairs. The proud designer stood beside his invention smiling and shaking hands with the other gentleman who entered the parlor. Edward Stubbs.

"The inventor, Silas Perkins, brought the machine into the mansion at Edward Stubbs' request. He would have been anxious to demonstrate his new discovery. Elizabeth knew nothing of the family's true intention."

Next the family was sitting round the table. Elizabeth was smiling, no doubt anxious to finally introduce her guardian to her family. She still hadn't an inkling of what was about to take place. Mr. Perkins flipped a switch on the machine and the atmosphere was filled with a heavy expectant energy. I dreaded what I was about to see.

Our own room became darker and more frenzied as the spirit of Lizzie became agitated. The projected scene changed to one of chaos. Family members in the image held on to a rocking table for stability as books and other debris began flying around the room. Another ear-splitting scream pierced the air as Mr. Perkins reached for yet another switch on the device and flipped it.

The final scene was one of Lizzie's guardian being ripped from the air and sucked into the dreaded device. Only Lizzie wasn't willing to let it go. Grabbing the hand of her guardian, Lizzie too was sucked into the machine.

"My God, this machine can't free Lizzie, she's bound to it," I shouted over the increasing chaos.

"What are you saying?" Pricilla called.

"Elizabeth Stubbs' spirit is trapped in this machine."

Our own machine was shooting sparks. I became concerned for our safety when it started to catch fire. All at once, I knew what I must do. Jumping up from the séance table I reached to its center and grabbed the infernal machine. The machine was still chattering and starting to burn as I hoisted it over my head, scraping the device against the unusually low ceiling. Turning toward a corner, I cast the machine against the wall where it exploded in a ball of sparks.

And just like that it was over. I could tell instantly that Lizzie was gone. I hoped that she was now free, gone to a much happier place than here where she'd been trapped for so many years. The machine lay smoldering in the corner of the room. I could see that it was no longer a fire hazard, but Dave jumped to his feet to snuff out the flames with a blanket lying on an easy chair.

"Well now, that was some show," Mr. Peterson exclaimed, rising from his seat.

Chapter 9

It was a beautiful day at the Hope Falls Community Cemetery, which always seems wrong to me. Alex accompanied me to the gravesite of Lizzie Stubbs as did Blue. Truth be told it would have been impossible to go without either one of them. Alex had become quite protective of me of late, especially after hearing Mr. Peterson's version of what happened at the séance in the playroom that afternoon. Blue was equally nervous about letting me go off alone since I had returned the last time dogged by an angry spirit.

As I laid the gladiolas on Lizzie's grave I realized that I was relieved to no longer be under the burden of her unhappy presence.

The Stubbs mansion opened to the community for guided tours on schedule and without incident, much to the disappointment of visitors who had been hoping to meet a ghost. Pricilla had looked radiant at the reception which hinted that she was finally getting some much needed sleep. Tara Lee was there and feeling smug about the fact that she had brought about an end to our feuding, though in reality Pricilla and I had grown much closer than she would ever have suspected. In the end we hadn't needed Tara Lee's help at all to become the closest of friends.

Much to Dad's relief, the relief of the Boston family, and the relief of those in attendance at the reception, my father was not asked to make a speech.

"So Pricilla, how are things working out with your two new house guests?" I asked when I finally got a moment alone with the host.

"Absolutely marvelous," Pricilla announced. "The boys, that's what I call them, are happy as clams spending the day together. And I have time to get on with my life. I really can't thank you enough for bringing them to my attention."

"I'm happy for you," I assured her, feeling glad.

But now as I stood over the grave of Elizabeth Stubbs I was both feeling sad and uncertain.

"You do believe that it's what she wanted me to do, don't you?" I asked Alex.

"Chloe, you released her from an eternity in hell. Of course it's what she would have wanted."

We didn't say much after that. After a time I felt awkward standing at the gravesite of someone I knew only circumstantially. Alex, Blue, and I soon left with Alex and me holding hands as we walked across the well-tended lawns of the cemetery back to the car.

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